Sustaining reflective conversation: a narrative exploration of advising and learning with small-business entrepreneurs

Rachelle Madeleine Mary Andrews

March 2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Hertfordshire for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Abstract

This research examines my practice as a business adviser working with small firms under the government-funded 'Business Link' contract, and with other clients looking to develop their business activities. In exploring the mainstream literature on advising, which draws on systems-based, economic and management theory, the social and relational nature of advising is largely overlooked. In addressing this gap, I take a pragmatic approach, drawing on theory that regards advising as social and situated in the present. My experience corresponds closely with concepts such as the 'conversation of gestures' from Mead's (1932, 1934) behavioural psychology, and relational concepts of power in Elias's (1956, Elias and Scotson, 1994) process sociology, both of which acknowledge that we are caught up in interdependent webs of interaction. Burkitt (1991, 2002) takes up these ideas in exploring ideas of social 'selves' as does Stacey (2001) in exploring 'complex responsive processes of relating'. Taking complexity sciences as a source domain has added a further body of literature that reflects the dynamic relationship between local interaction and emergent social patterning of organisation. Other work recognises the contribution to this view of experience, learning and knowledge as constructed relationally in the present, and further to this viewpoint I explore Siegel's (2008, 2012, 2016) interpersonal neurobiology. In particular, I reference Siegel's exploration of 'mind', in which, in a similar way to Mead, he sees mind as emerging both in and between individuals.

The traditional view regards advising as a role in which the adviser is acting as a facilitator, transferring knowledge to the client. This view of advising follows a linear timeline, where the adviser is left unchanged in the process. My experience was of advising as a reflective, conversational process, where themes arose in the communicative participation of the client–adviser relationship. Advising was a messy and negotiated process from which novel and often surprising themes emerged unexpectedly in the midst of conversation. With clients, increased understanding of past experience and possibilities for the future are co-constructed in the present in ongoing complex responsive processes of relating (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). Taking a reflexive narrative research methodology is consistent with an understanding of learning and knowledge emerging from a dynamic social process of enquiry. This methodology explores the conversational nature of advising, recognising the temporal nature of research. I am drawing on experience of many years of working with the owners and managers of small firms. This process has continued in conversation with my supervisors, colleagues and other researchers, and my thinking and assumptions about practice has evolved. In this reflexive process, new perspectives have arisen, such as how meaning is co-created in tensions of resistance and recognition. In the narrative process, I also recognise the influence of policy, contractual responsibilities and other enabling and constraining factors on my work with clients. These influences are paradoxically forming and being formed by local interaction in the context of the here and now. This idea resonates strongly with the idea of experience evolving in the dynamic activities of everyday life understood as phronesis or practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2005, Thomas, 2010).

This research makes a number of contributions. In arguing for practice as complex, a process in which shifting power relations are arising in ongoing conversation taking place in the living present, I am addressing a gap in the literature. I argue that this social process, which evolves in and between client and adviser, has been largely overlooked in the literature on business advice. I am also paying attention to the use of artefacts in sustaining exploratory conversation Additionally, I am making a contribution to the methodology of qualitative research by using reflexive narrative methods in the exploration of personal practice. These narratives increase understanding of how such an approach can elicit deeper meaning from the advising process, adding to studies that challenge the 'expert' view of advising activity by paying attention to its social nature. I also contribute to the practice of business advising from a policy perspective, recognising that this research has implications for how advising services might be refocused and developed to meet the needs of small-business managers. Finally, in this reflexive process I have been making sense of my experience by drawing on theory that explores how 'mind', and a sense of 'self' emerge in our relationships with others. I hope that a further contribution is that other practitioners will recognise familiar patterns from which they might reflect and learn.

Acknowledgements

It would be impossible to describe the support and encouragement that has contributed to the development of this work, and to the learning that I have gained through the process. The opportunity to work under the Business Link contract offered deep insights into the broader understanding of advising as practice and these ideas would not have taken shape without conversation with many colleagues and clients over the years of 'being' an adviser.

In taking up these ideas as research, it has been remarkable to find that others have been willing to give their time, energy, and ideas so generously to enable me to get to this point. This has been a significant influence on how I understand experience as ongoing social processes of relating. The number of individuals that I owe a debt of gratitude is long, and writing the contributions that they have made to my studies and my life would take too long, but there are some who I wish to thank personally for going beyond the call of duty.

Firstly, my three supervisors, Dr Dorothea Noble, Dr Yasmin Imani and Dr Peter Fraser, have been wonderful. Their belief in my work has enabled and encouraged me to explore aspects of practice that I had never considered at the outset of this work. Further to this, my work with the PhD group, has given me opportunities to share ideas with others who I value and respect immensely. To Dr Jana Filosof (you do not know the pride with which I write thetitle Dr before your name), Dr David Bentley, Dr Farshid Azadegan, and Prof Chris Mowles from CMC, I am so grateful to you all for the continual challenges, questions, and critique of my work, which has cajoled me into reflecting more deeply on experience than I could ever have imagined. This process has developed life skills that have increased my ability to recognise and value the evoking of emotions as a way of learning reflexively, and continues to influence my practice.

Finally, I have to thank my family for their support to me in what has been an extended period of study. I know that I have not always been around to do the sort of everyday things that I felt that as a mother and a wife I should be doing, so to John, Annabel, and William I hope that I can make this up to you all someday. To my husband Roy, there are no words that would serve to thank you for the calm, measured way that you have dealt with every one of my crises, remaining patient and loyal, feeding and caring for me throughout this process. Your unfailing belief that I would get to the end and that we could have a day out for a change on a Sunday has kept me going.

Contents

Table 1 Abbreviations used in the research

CAS	Complex Adaptive Systems
CMC	Complexity and Management Centre
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
EEDA	East of England Development Agency
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GVA	Gross Value Added
HEBN	Herts and Essex Business Network
IDB	Information, Diagnostic and Brokerage
ONS	Office for National Statistics
RDA	Regional Development Agencies
SBS	Small Business Service
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
UH	University of Hertfordshire

Chapter 1 Exploring business advising as arising in the 'living present'

Introduction

In 2003, I took up a role as a business adviser working with small-business owners and entrepreneurs. I was working under the Business Link contract, and over a period of seven years I had the privilege of meeting and working with several hundred clients. Prior to this, I had been involved in small-business activity myself, through running my own dance school and then through working with my husband in a company he had set up and managed for almost twenty-five years. The transition from working in a small organisation to becoming an adviser provided privileged insights into advising practice. It gave me an understanding of the everyday experiences of small organisations, as well as insights into what it was like to work closely with a business adviser prior to taking up the role myself. This experience has become a narrative theme of this research, in which I speak of my shift from business owner to business adviser and the influence this had on my practice (Appendix 1). This period of transition included two years during which I worked with a Business Link adviser, Jonathan Reynolds, while struggling with the challenges of a failing situation in the family business, CasanCo. This situation was one that was particularly emotional for me, as I finally made the decision to close down the company. This was not easy and left me with feelings of sadness and of blaming myself for what had happened. As I have reflected on this time I have come to recognise it as a rich and insightful experience, but it has taken time to appreciate how it has influenced the way I work with others.

I am aware that when, as an adviser, clients discussed their complex business issues with me, my personal experience influenced how I developed my practice. I experienced advising as an emergent process, and my approach to working developed to be responsive to what came up in the midst of conversation. It was in conversation with clients that new ways of thinking and understanding would arise in the twists and turns of the discussion. Contrary to some views of advising activity, I could never predict the outcomes of meetings, and I became interested in the tensions between the spontaneous and creative experience of working with clients and the requirements of my role to fit this experience into abstracted data input to organisational reporting systems. In this government-funded context, I was working within the constraints of the requirement to monitor and evaluate the take-up and impact of support initiatives. These tensions reflected working in a fluid, exploratory way with clients, while at the same time being adaptive to the influences of policy, targets and goals. These seemed like separate worlds, but as an adviser I was working in both simultaneously. Dualistic assumptions create a separation between adviser and client, as, for example, the world of the adviser is categorised as rational,

institutional and theoretical, in contrast to a pejorative view of the informal and idiosyncratic world of the small-business owner (Dyer and Ross, 2008).

In an exploration of the research on advising it is difficult to situate experience of advising within what are often statistically based evaluations used to justify or challenge the use of government funds. Some work has looked at this tension in a general sense, for example, the comparison between 'hard' and 'soft' support (Ramsden and Bennett, 2005, Wren and Storey, 2002). 'Soft' in this context is defined as subjective, cognitive and involving change in the business owner's outlook (Ramsden and Bennett, 2005:228), while 'hard' advice relates to cost reductions or increases in profits or turnover (ibid.). This clearly sets out a separation between these different qualities of the support process, a dualism that is commonly encountered in research into advising. However, these different aspects are inseparable, as they influence each other in the midst of exploring business situations and contexts.

There is a general assumption that it is possible to treat the small business as though it is a system in which the adviser makes an 'intervention' (Reid et al., 2013), and in which solutions are found through knowledge transferred from an external individual to the local context of the business owner or manager (Chrisman, 1999). This systemic view is rarely challenged in the literature. In contrast to this linear view of advising, in which small businesses are discussed as having boundaries which separate them as entities from the advising conversation, experience suggested to me that meetings were a complex interplay between adviser and client. The clients were entrepreneurial small-business owners and managers. There is often a suggestion that the adviser comes with defined knowledge that can be applied to business problems once the business client has given a clear idea of what the problem is. This is a view that permeates management theory in general, suggesting that consulting and advising bring a sense of certainty to the business. However, my experience is that advising is a negotiated process, not something that can be predetermined, or in which advice is something to be 'given' to the client. I am particularly interested in the different perspectives that take this dualism as the norm, because in practice there was no clear line that could be drawn between the adviser and the client. This has led to the exploration in this thesis of advising as a social activity.

Business Link and policy-based views of support

Business Link was a policy-led initiative launched in the 1990s. It followed from the Bolton Report (1971) that brought increased government focus onto the largely neglected topic of small businesses. The report's conclusions were that 'the small firm sector of the economy is viable, but is declining in size and its share of economic activity' (Bates, 1972:372). It was

further suggested that in this particular 'sector' of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), there were a number of issues to be addressed, including a lack of formal systems and processes in place. Bolton paternalistically posed this as a problem that needed to be addressed by management consultants taking on a very particular role:

> Much of what the consultant does in a small firm could best be described as training the proprietor - inducing him to examine his situation objectively and honestly, opening his eyes to new ways of solving problems and overcoming his prejudice against unfamiliar techniques - and this element of management training is probably their most enduring and valuable contribution to efficiency (Bolton, 1971:123).

Once Bolton had brought small firms to the attention of the government, and suggested that, with outside help, they could contribute more to the economy, a number of business-support initiatives followed. In the 1990s Michael Heseltine was President of the Board of Trade, in charge of the Department of Trade and Industry. Coming from a business and consulting background himself, he recognised that there was a need for support for small-business owners. Forte (2011) takes up the story, reporting on Michael Heseltine's argument that what SME owners needed was a focal point for accessing subsidised advice and information, something he called a 'one stop shop'. The introduction of Training and Enterprise Councils followed, and these were then transformed into branded business support under the title 'Business Link'. The organisation was launched as a way of addressing perceived market failures in the business-support sector through the provision of Business Link-branded information and advice (Priest, 1999). This national initiative was delivered with regional variations. In 2003, I joined Business Link Hertfordshire, which was one of six Business Link branches in the East of England area.

In an interview with Forte (2011:249), Heseltine talked of how his remit for support was for advisers to be 'a friend in need, to do what you could to answer their questions' suggesting that 'we never tried to tell anyone how to conduct an interview or what to look for'. This perspective could well have been influenced by his own entrepreneurial career prior to becoming a politician. Heseltine certainly reflected a more facilitative view of the role of business support than Bolton's suggestion that consultants were there to open the eyes of the client. There is a substantial difference between these two perspectives on support. The idea of advisers acting like a friend in need seemed to have been lost in the stringent reporting that was required by the time I took up the role. On becoming a business adviser, I attended an extensive induction, which ran over four weeks. I attended talks about the range of services Business Link was

offering at the time, and was introduced to the initiatives and targets to be achieved in order to meet contractual obligations. However, very little was said about what we were expected to do when we were 'advising'. This makes sense based on Heseltine's view, which suggests that the adviser has freedom to respond to client needs. This was in contrast with the reality of the highly monitored environment of targets and goals that I became involved in.

Business support was categorised, and members of adviser teams were targeted to work with clients from organisations that fell within the SME definition. The definition used at the time was the one put forward by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 2001): all SMEs have under 250 employees, with 'small' firms having under fifty, and micro firms having under ten; by default, medium-sized companies have over fifty employees. However, the majority of clients accessing support came from the small and micro categories, with fewer clients coming from medium-sized organisations. There were targets set for the number of client meetings, and initiatives to be discussed with clients were frequently introduced, along with other training and development opportunities that we were expected to promote. The Business Link contract drove these targets, with each adviser being given a share of the overall targets for the year, which were regularly reported upon. Once I was out meeting with clients I never knew what to expect, and working under the Business Link contract gave me the opportunity of meeting with many different types of clients. Working as an adviser gave me a broad understanding of the patterning of business activities and an opportunity to explore this with others, and this experience was continually evolving. Although constrained by meetings that were mostly two hours in duration, there were opportunities to develop longer-term client relationships, which enabled deeper insights into the business situations under discussion.

Exploring mainstream views of small-business advising and Business Link support

My interest in the social perspective of support encouraged a search of the literature, which falls into a number of different categories. There are studies that look at 'advice' as an entity that can be discussed separately from the relational experience. Much of this literature related to Business Link support took an economic perspective, drawing on aggregated data and statistical information to evaluate the impact of the support (e.g. Bennett and Robson, 1999a, Summon, 1998, Priest, 1999, Robson and Bennett, 2000, Bennett et al., 2001, Bennett and Robson, 2005, Atherton et al., 2010). Other work sets out to justify support (Priest, 1999, Summon, 1998), or challenge it (Curran and Storey, 2002, Storey, 2004). Further work discusses advice with a focus on 'growth' (Audretsch, 2004, Deakins and Freel, 1998, Smallbone and Baldock, 2004), or evaluates the impact of policy on support (Summon, 1998, Wren and Storey, 2002). Related to this plethora of evaluation of advising outcomes, other

studies address the providers, such as the Business Link contractors (Bennett and Robson, 1999a, Bennett et al., 2001). In relation to Business Link, Lean et al. (1999) highlight some of the tensions between policy influences and their impact on the ability of advisers to establish meaningful relationships. They talk of conflict between local responses to nationally determined policy, and the challenges of focusing on the needs of clients in light of constraints on funding streams. While they raise awareness of a range of influences on the success of small firms, they see this as being a matter of selection of clients *a priori*, rather than a relational issue. Although these studies identify trends and ideas that emerge in government-funded advisory services, there is little recognition of advising as a situated activity, or discussion of how advisers work with their entrepreneurial clients in practice.

A second body of research explores the role and practice of the adviser, often seen as an autonomous individual who brings expertise and knowledge to the client as the recipient of the advice. There are a number of researchers who take this perspective, for example by exploring communication between the more formal business adviser and the more chaotic business context (Dyer and Ross, 2007). However, these retain a strongly systemic view of advising relationships, in which adviser and client are acting rationally. In their study, Dyer and Ross (ibid.) interviewed a range of advisers, including individuals working for banks, legal practices and government-funded advisers, to understand more about the context of advising the small firm. They reflect advice as a staged process, in which, in the initial stage, it is the responsibility of the client to 'present the business problems appropriately' (Dyer and Ross, 2007:139). This is supported by Mole (2007) who suggests that the starting point is what the owner-manager wants for their small firm. He argues that the adviser can then test the congruence between the wants of the management and the business's operations. It is often seen that responsibility for a lack of clarity in identifying problems in the advising process is put onto the client. Witzel (2015), who relates this more generally to consulting, similarly identifies advice as a staged process.

The concept of 'the client' in advising literature is one that often overlooks individual context and needs, and Alvesson et al. (2009) argue that clients are often conceptualised in a static and simplistic way. The clients of Business Link were often extremely entrepreneurial and diverse. In the exploration of practice there is no simple definition that might reflect particular characteristics of an entrepreneur or their needs, and Howorth et al. (2005) suggest that 'entrepreneurial activity' is a term that encompasses many aspects of business activity. Because of the wide range of businesses that Business Link advisers were targeted to work with I am drawing here on Heinrichs and Walter (2013), who suggest taking a broad definition to enable

an inclusive view of entrepreneurial activity to be considered. They take the perspective of the entrepreneur 'as an individual independently owning and actively managing a business' (ibid:226), and this explanation takes in the majority of the clients I worked with, including those who are included in my narratives and evolving research themes. In their review of client-consulting relationships, Alvesson et al. (2009) draw particular attention to three aspects that are often overlooked: client diversity, processes of construction of client and client identity, and the dynamic relations that evolve in the advising process. In practice, although Business Link advisers were working with smaller organisations, similar simplifications arise in relation to the variety of business clients and the complexity of the business situations Alvesson is discussing. This suggests an increased requirement to pay attention to the social context of client–adviser interactions.

In the body of work relating to advisers there are studies that introduce a relational perspective, such as the role of advisers as 'sounding boards' (Mole and Keogh, 2009), and of advising considered from a situated context (Dyer and Ross, 2007, Dalley and Hamilton, 2000). However, even in these approaches it is difficult to identify work that explores the dynamic and emergent nature of advising as responsive, conversational practice taking place in the present. I recognise many of the trends and ideas that emerge in studies that take a more a generalised perspective of government-funded advisory services. However, it has been disappointing to see how the view of the personal and often transformational experience of advising is masked in these approaches. I found that the advising conversation was full of the potential for something novel and different, but it is difficult to manage the expectation of being able to reflect predictable and robust outcomes from the messy, relational and emotional experience of advising. These tensions were not favourable for the continuation of support, and in 2011 the face-to-face Business Link service was discontinued. This was partly due to the views of Doug Richard, who chaired a Task Force to evaluate Business Link services.

Richard (2008) stated in the report that there was some benefit to the provision of support. However, he went on to argue that without evidence that was more robust he would recommend scaling back funding for such services. The report's conclusions repeatedly refer to a 'lack of correlations' with a number of measures that were chosen to evaluate support. One statement stands out:

> The lack of any measurable macroeconomic impact does not prove that Government intervention is not helpful in any individual instances. It almost certainly is. However, it does place the onus firmly on the Government either

> to prove more robustly that its expenditure is having impact or to consider scaling back surplus cost (Richard, 2008:16).

Richard's view reflects evidence from a previous study that government programmes of support are generally perceived as helpful (Nahavandi and Chesteen, 1988). It is disheartening, therefore, to see the move in government policy away from face-to-face support, and towards web-based diagnostic and information services, as recommended by Richard's report. This decision has left a gap in face-to-face support which online services have not filled (Mole et al., 2014). Frustration at the lack of recognition of the practice of advising, overlooked as it is in macroeconomic studies, has been the stimulus from which this research has evolved. This view has some support: Curran (2000) identifies that the majority of research into business support conducted between the 1980s and 2000 takes a quantitative approach, and a similar point has been made about research into entrepreneurship more generally (McDonald et al., 2015). The issue that Curran points to is that the heterogeneity of SMEs is such that quantitative approaches offer no understanding of the individual context of the take-up of support. There is thus an opportunity to explore advising from a social perspective to address this gap in the literature, with the exploration of practice drawn from particularised client–adviser experience.

Changing the perspective: towards a social understanding of advising

There is some research in which practitioners have brought the topic of experience into the exploration of aspects of advising. The work of Dalley and Hamilton (2000), for example, talks about knowledge, context and learning, and this resonates with the challenges that I was beginning to explore. They talk of the 'contextual compatibility' (ibid:55) of adviser and client, and this felt important to me. I was initially interpreting Dalley and Hamilton's ideas of contextual compatibility as representing a fluid, responsive process, however on re-reading the paper a few years after my first impressions, the systems-based assumptions made in it became problematic. They place the adviser outside the client situation, requiring the alignment of adviser experience with client in order for the transfer of knowledge to take place:

> If information is to be processed through to the stage at which it is transformed by learning into new knowledge, this cannot be perceived to be in conflict with the core beliefs of the business (Dalley and Hamilton, 2000:57).

The suggestion here is that advisers will need to align their knowledge with the client's situation, with a fixed view of the culture of the business, and with core beliefs that may not be challenged. As this research has evolved, I have found it more and more difficult to support

these assumptions. Advising is not a transference of knowledge (Chrisman, 1999), but rather a process that recognises advising as taking place in local interactions, where meaning arises in feelings and emotions as we are interacting with others. I cannot ignore that I have a history of working with the challenges of the uncertainty of small-business activities. I am also aware that I have personal experience of working closely with a Business Link adviser, Jonathan (Appendix 1) myself, and that he had his own views about how to solve complex business issues by simplifying them using a modelling approach. In this way, I felt that he was separating out exploratory and spontaneous conversation from the figures in the spreadsheet calculations that he would use to guide future actions. In explaining and justifying my research approach, I am arguing that by taking a social perspective I cannot step outside experience, as this is forming and being formed as I interact with others in the present, and that this makes advising practice non-linear and emergent.

As I explore my practice, I am paying attention to writing in the living present. What I mean by this is that nothing that happens is random, but neither is it predictable, as patterns of interaction are always forming in the intertwining of the past and the future of the living present (Loewen Walker, 2014, Shaw, 2002). Each experience has the potential to influence how I am interacting with others in the present. This makes advising responsive to what is coming up in the midst of conversation, and, in an advising situation, just as I am responding to my own intentions and experience, this is equally the case for clients. I will develop this theme further as the thesis progresses. What is important to state in this introduction is that the flow of the research, and the evolution of the narratives that will form the basis of discussion throughout, do not follow a linear timeline. In this process of thinking and writing, and of sharing work with others, themes and ideas from past situations are influencing understanding in the present, thus shifting and changing meaning. In order to give a sense of a time to this research I have set out a diagram (Appendix 2) which gives a sense of how experience from different activities is entwined in the research. This fluid, non-linear process can obscure the sense of 'what happened when', and a timeline has the purpose of giving some sense of temporal flow to the work. The timeline follows themes of work and study matched with the dates on which they took place. This has become a useful marker for situations and events; however, in a linear form it does not allow for an understanding of the way in which one event might shift and change the understanding of another.

Focusing on the development of 'a social self and other' in research practice

The interrelatedness of work and study has become a theme of this research, and I consider how it influences my practice. The initial exploration of advising practice with clients led me

to think and reflect on my broader experience as a client. This in turn has led to reflection on the experience of running a business, and I am also aware that for a short time I took up the role of training and development manager, training other advisers. These complex social relations evolve over time, reflecting a non-linear understanding that contrasts with the timeline I have developed (Appendix 2).

This is a reflective process. Drawing on my experience of advising practice with entrepreneurial small-business owners and managers, I started with a research question that gave me the opportunity to explore the following: 'What am I doing when I say I am advising?' This does not follow the mainstream view, which might be construed, for example, as advising being understood as the generation of action plans to be implemented. I am interested in the experience of advising from within the processes of human relating. This focuses the study on social relations, paying attention to advising as a way of encouraging reflective enquiry, where meaning and knowledge emerge in communicative participation. This was not how I initially saw my practice, and while I saw it as a conversational process, I was not confident about what this might mean in relation to the research. Conversation is more than words, and research that explores this encompasses the fields of linguistics, sociology, psychology and anthropology (Speer and Stokoe, 2011), as well as the social understanding of the emergence of mind and neurobiology (Siegel, 2016). Experientially, conversation also reflects feelings and emotions that are unpredictably called out in the sense-making processes of finding a way to go on together.

Recognising the emergence of a social self challenges the ideology and constraints of systems-based thinking. An alternative perspective draws on complexity theories. In Chapter 2, I explore how complexity theories, drawn from natural sciences, have evolved to reflect social and organisational activity. These approaches explore the paradoxical nature of organisational life in constant flux, demonstrating paradoxical stability and instability occurring simultaneously (Griffin et al., 1998). This approach has been developed over many years by Ralph Stacey and colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire (Griffin et al., 1998, Griffin and Stacey, 2005, Mowles et al., 2008, Stacey, 2010, Stacey, 2011) in what they have termed 'the science of uncertainty'. Stacey's work developed initially from ideas around complex adaptive systems (Dooley, 2004), often referred to by the acronym CAS, that offered new ways of understanding organisational activity. However, realising that these deterministic models were limiting understanding of the transformative causality and unpredictable nature of social activity, Stacey (2010) has extended these ideas to reflect the inherently social nature of organisation. Drawing on the process sociology of Norbert Elias (1956) and the behavioural

psychology of George Herbert Mead (1934), Stacey brings further insights to themes of temporality, power and responsive communication that reflect aspects of human interaction missing in complex adaptive systems. This development introduces 'complex responsive processes of relating' (Stacey, 2001), reflecting the difference between the capacity to 'adapt' seen as a system characteristic, and the human capacity to act responsively as a temporal learning process. These ideas are interrelated with themes contained in the theory of the formation of the self in relation to other, which Burkitt (1991) takes up in his work. These views of the paradoxical relations between individuals and organisations are taken up as the basis of a social understanding of business advising developed here, and will be further explored in this thesis.

In paying attention to how learning and knowledge evolve in our experience with others, I understand that this influences my advising practice and my work with clients. Paying attention to experience as a means of learning is important as we deepen understanding (Higgins, 2017a), and is critical to sustaining conversation and asking questions that challenge and open up new ways of thinking. Exploring advising from a social perspective suggests further considerations in addressing the question of relational practice, such as when Shaw (2002) asks 'How are we are making sense of ourselves and how do we go on from here?' Such questions further inform this enquiry process, encouraging a reflexive approach to the exploration of practice. I develop an understanding of this fluid approach to exploring business advising here. I am arguing that this is co-created, arising in the interplay between all participants in the process. I became more comfortable with understanding my practice as a flow of conversation. In paying attention to practice, conversation is complex, and the past and future anticipations of all participants are caught up in a perpetually constructing future taking place in present activity. I have come to understand conversation as self-organising, as themes under discussion are developed, dropped, diverted, interrupted and subsequently revived in other situations (Noble, 1999). This is something that is explored through Mead's (1934) theory of the 'conversation of gestures'. In these 'gestural conversations' (Simpson and Elkjaer, 2011:21), communication is seen as responsive, in contrast to the more commonly applied 'sender receiver' models, in which meaning is held by an individual.

In exploration of the lived experience of everyday life Burkitt (2004), who like Simpson and Stacey draws on the work of Mead, sees the present as complex and nuanced, where past experience is not fixed and is always influencing our actions in the present. Mead (1932:73) argues that 'the social nature of the present arises out of its emergence', where new objects enter into relationship with the old in a process of readjustment. The sense I have when working

with clients is of a continual process of readjustment between old and new, creating an emergent present reality where, for those participating in the advising conversation, something of the old will always be part of the present in the form of 'now'. These reflections on the temporal nature of practice, where past and future are called out in the present, provide me with a way of talking about practice that feels like an escape from the abstract evaluation perspective of much of the business-support literature.

Following on from these views of practice, I am arguing that advising is a social activity, and in exploring my understanding of the practice of business advising I realise that past experiences and anticipations of the future are present in every interaction in which I work with others. I have come to see my practice arising in the 'living present', a complex and non-linear view that is taken up by others writing about temporality in social research. For example Loewen Walker (2014) explores the living present related to feminism and identity, recognising that we are formed by our past, but not in a deterministic way in which we are bound by past or by fate to an impending future. Shaw (2002) explores her consulting practice taking place in the living present. She says it is 'here' that we are busily fashioning from the resources of the 'past' made afresh in this 'living present'. It is in this process that new ways of working can be found 'in the light of future channels of possible action we are thus opening up' (Shaw, 2002:48). In her focus on 'conversation as an art', Shaw (2011) takes a view that is particularly resonant for me in considering my evolving advising practice, and which I develop further in Chapter 6.

In taking a reflexive approach to research, I am referring to how practice is informed through paying attention to reflective conversation, where meaning arises in and between those participating in communicative interaction. Nikolova et al. (2009:296) introduce the idea of 'reflective conversations' in their work on adviser and client relations, suggesting a process that can increase cooperative learning for generating solutions to problems. This makes reflection open to further discussion and to influencing how we might act in the future. There is a distinction here in how I am taking up ideas of conversation in this research, as I argue that sustaining reflective conversation, in the singular form, is a process that has a sense of holding space for more exploratory and open enquiry. In Chapter 3, I argue that reflective conversation can be related to the context of both advising and research as I recognise that perceived problems and potential solutions can evolve and transform for all participants, which is not reflected in the way that Nikolova et al. use the term. This is not reflected in the mainstream approaches that explore the relationships between adviser and client.

Stacey's work further explores global patterns arising from local interactions, helping to make sense of the social situations in which we are involved. This reflects something of the tensions that I was struggling with between situated conversation with clients and the structures of the reporting systems. I explore these as part of the broader context of advising practice. Following the view of Stacey et al. (2000), I understand these positions as paradoxical, paying attention to what is known and unknown and stable and unstable at the same time. In this way, the timeline for research remains stable, but my understanding of events and situations evolves in the reflective process. This resonates with the idea that taking a social approach:

> has implications for agency because how we act, the powers we accrue or the constraints upon us, do not rest on our relation to structure but on the nature of our interdependence with others and how this shapes our mutual interactions (Burkitt, 2016:332).

Taking up these ideas of interdependence, I am making sense of advising experience as socially constructed, with recognition of themes of power and ethics that paradoxically enable and constrain action.

What does this mean in the context of the research?

Through drawing on experience of working with clients, sharing ideas with the PhD group I have been working with, submitting work and attending conferences, I have gained insights and understanding from engaging with others in an exploratory way. The narratives have been developed iteratively over the course of the research, a process in which deeper meaning has emerged as I make sense of them in the context of a 'community of enquirers' (Mowles, 2011). I have struggled at times to make sense of the tensions between mainstream views and the sense of personal fulfilment experienced when a meeting finished with increased awareness or new ideas for adviser and client. This is a view of practice as lived and human relating. Emotion is the source of all of our thinking, resulting from our relations to the world and the people we are in relation with (Burkitt, 2012). Working in this way, as a researcher exploring personal practice, has been emotional, and I understand this as a bodily, rather than an 'embodied' experience. As humans with bodies, we can never separate ourselves from feelings and thoughts that come up for us as we relate to others. This supports the rationale for this research, taking a narrative approach in which I pay attention to the experience of working with others.

In the narratives, I explore the nature of advising. Because of the high targets imposed by the Business Link contract, advising was largely focused on first meetings, with often only a short time available to develop an 'advising' relationship. This is an aspect that has received

relatively little attention in the advising literature (Mole and McLaughlin, 2006). In practice, meetings were usually two hours long, and it was crucial to move quickly to a situation where a client would feel comfortable to share often personal and private information about their business situation. In describing experience I talk in Chapter 2 about the shift to a sense of 'being let in', at which point the advising conversation becomes full of vitality and energy, and which develops when topics that are meaningful and responsive to the client situation are discussed. In Chapter 4, I relate this to a shift from stranger to confidante. This does not fit with the view prevalent in the literature that sees advising as an intervention. These moments can never be predetermined, something that is a theme throughout the narratives in this research.

I bring a unique experience of Business Link to this research, as prior to becoming an adviser I had also been a small-business owner as well as a client of Business Link services. I had also had the experience of working with other advisers, and as Training and Development Manager, supporting those new to the role, which added to the breadth to my experience. As a client, I know that I had valued having access to support and having someone to talk to when things became challenging. However, the limitations of support became clear when, due to unexpected circumstances, I made the decision to close the company (described in Appendix 1). When I think of working with Jonathan, there was something of a struggle going on, in which our different ways of working led to challenges relating to what might be the most appropriate action going forward. For me, I was responding to the challenges of the business crisis as these emerged. Closing the business may have been a decision that was extremely emotional and upsetting at the time, but it highlighted the limitations of business support from the client perspective. These different perspectives gave me the sense of the ongoing negotiation of adviser and client identity. I recognise that the Value Added Spreadsheet model Jonathan had developed guided his approach. However, taking on an adviser role later, I also recognise the constraints he was facing in fulfilling the requirements of his Business Link adviser role. I know that this experience influenced how I took up the role of adviser and how my work with clients evolved. How these aspects are taken up in mainstream views of advising did not ring true to me as I reflected on experience, and this has led to the exploration of practice to bring a different perspective to this area of research. While I am not offering a prescription that can be directly transferred to the practice of others, the intention is that these ideas will resonate and inform how others understand and develop their practice.

The structure of the work

The chapters that follow take an exploratory and explanatory view of advising, through narratives that have become woven into my understanding of practice. Shaw (2011) talks of 'vivid moments of experience' emerging in participative communication, and how paying attention to these can lead to questions of what these might mean as we reflect. It is with this in mind that I am exploring particular moments that have become narratives in this work, and which have opened up new threads of conversation from which I explore practice.

As the thesis progresses, I explore the dynamics of client meetings. These experiences can be challenging, with adviser and client engaged in a negotiated process in which a sense of what I have called 'being let in' can emerge. In Chapter 2, by drawing on experience of a first meeting, the narrative explores shifting power relating. This leads to a critique of traditional theories of consulting and advising which do not recognise the relational and responsive nature of advising practice. In this chapter, complexity theories are introduced as an alternative perspective for understanding practice.

Following the critique of traditional views and research on advising presented in Chapter 2, the evolution of my research methodology in more detail is explored in Chapter 3. I investigate how my understanding of the research process has evolved as I have reflected on experience in working in the PhD group, exploring the implications of methods that take a reflexive narrative approach. I make the connection between advising practice and research practice in this work. Reflective enquiry applies to my own thinking about research, as well as to my work with clients. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of ethical issues in taking a reflexive approach, and of the generalisability of research that draws on personal experience.

In Chapter 4, I explore themes of 'stuckness' and how this contrasts with ideas of 'being let in'. I draw on contrasting themes that reflect personal practice and conversation with clients, and which relate to the CasanCo situation. In drawing on narrative experience of past situations and taking a reflective approach, new understandings of the past can inform and shift practice in the present.

In Chapter 5, I explore practice taking place in the 'living present' (Loewen Walker, 2014, Shaw, 2002), drawing on a meeting with a client in which I reflect particularly on how past influences and future anticipations influence how we interact in the present. Drawing on Mead's (1934) theory of gesture and response, and the work of Siegel (1999, 2016) exploring the emergence of mind, I pay attention to conversation arising in the client context. This further develops ideas of how reflexivity is inherent in the evolution of ongoing practice

In Chapter 6, I explore a range of advising contexts. Here the concept of phronesis (Flinn and Mowles, 2014, Flyvbjerg, 2005) is explored as a way of understanding personal practice as developing the capacity to act responsively to context and situation. This suggests that we are negotiating ways to go on together and making decisions that reflect aspects of practical judgement. This includes abductive reasoning, recognising power relating emerging local interaction, and the emergence of ethics in our day-to-day work with others.

In Chapter 7, the broader context of government funding is discussed, and how the interactions of many individuals acting locally create global patterns. I explore ongoing interaction and the dynamics of working together influenced by policy, as a team and with suppliers and clients. I relate this to how advising arises in local contexts, where it is forming and being formed by global patterns at the same time. I explore this in relation to the concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990, Elias, 2001), seen from the perspective of getting caught up in the game and how this can work against a meaningful experience for the client.

In Chapter 8, I set out how I have come to understand business advising beyond my role as a Business Link adviser, exploring what this means in relation to practice in different contexts, reflecting ethical choices, as well as practical outcomes. I link this to the theme of advising as an activity related to planning, and explore planning as another form of 'the game'. The idea of 'social object' is used to reflect the influence of a 'tendency to act' as we respond to the expectations of others such as those providing funding.

In Chapter 9, I bring all the themes explored together in drawing overall conclusions about sustaining co-created reflective conversation. It is here that I make sense of advising practice as reflective enquiry in the living present. I go on to relate these conclusions to the ways in which I have developed my teaching practice in business, and how practice continues to evolve in making sense of my work with students. In this chapter, I will identify the contributions to knowledge and practice that have arisen in the reflective research process.

Chapter 2 Exploring business advising as social and relational

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the practice of business advising as a process of finding ways of working together. The narrative introduced here – a first meeting with Peter Conway, at the time Managing Director of MSB Ltd – reflects the frequently messy nature of advising and consulting, and the conflictual and contested nature of advising conversation. This contrasts with mainstream views, which are often based on approaches that draw on taken-for-granted assumptions of 'systems-based' organisations, and the idea of advising and consulting as 'interventions' (Johnson, 2005, Schein, 2003, Witzel, 2015). Here, I explore adviser identity and themes of power relations in terms of complexity theories, as an alternative way of understanding how these arise in a social view of practice.

Business advising as a process of negotiating and exploring ways of 'going on together'

Not long after I started at Business Link, I attended a client meeting set up by the marketing team. I never knew what to expect of these meetings, as often all I had was a name and address of a company in my diary, along with the date and time of the meeting. Meetings with clients were scheduled for two hours. In this time, an adviser was expected to undertake a diagnostic-type procedure to identify with the client particular issues or problems, and to develop an action plan suggesting follow-up activities to address these issues. On this particular day, I checked the customer relationship management (CRM) system as a preparatory process for identifying additional details about the company that might be helpful for me. I was very surprised to see that there were notes about a string of previous visits by other advisers who had visited the business over recent years. This raised concerns. My feeling was that if all these advisers had been working with the client then what would I be able to offer.

Arriving outside the offices my anxiety grew; the buildings were imposing and very different to many of my other client visits (where premises were often very small and a bit ramshackle!). I introduced myself to the receptionist and noticed that beside me was a freestanding board on which the following words were set out in gold letters on red velvet:

MSB Ltd Welcomes … Rachelle Andrews from Business Link

I felt both a sense of relief that I was expected, and under pressure from such an official welcome. The receptionist rang upstairs to Dr Peter Conway, the MD, to say that I had arrived. I stood and waited in the reception area, taking in the surroundings and getting a sense of the situation. It occurred to me that the working environment seemed to be very orderly and calm

from where I was standing. I took out my business card as I waited and was holding this in my hand when Peter arrived. I was also holding the folder I took to most meetings. This folder contained a range of artefacts that served a number of purposes. It held current Business Link literature, and a pad and pen to write notes. I also included a checklist of topics that I had created that I thought might be useful. I had developed this pack in the first few weeks after becoming an adviser, as this lessened to some extent the sense of uncertainty I experienced at first meetings in particular. Although I rarely looked at it once the conversation got going, it offered me a 'fall back' to guide discussion if needed, calming my anxieties.

When Peter came down the stairs to meet me he smiled in a welcoming way, and we shook hands. I am not sure what happened next but somehow the business card I was preparing to hand over flew up in the air, and I watched as it fluttered down and landed on the other side of the banister rail, out of reach. I felt really embarrassed, but Peter shrugged it off and said '*someone would get it later*'. I followed him upstairs and as we walked through an open plan area, I felt very conspicuous. Along one side of the office were a number of desks with people working away without taking much notice of me. Peter's office was partitioned off from the main room. Walking in, it appeared spacious and ordered, with an expanse of windows giving a view over the industrial estate to the green fields beyond. His large desk was at the far end, with a round table and four chairs. He took my coat formally, hung it in a cupboard, and I sat down at the table, setting out my pad and pen as he joined me.

Hospitably, Peter asked if I wanted tea and relayed this to his secretary who had followed us in, and then he looked at me expectantly. These are the most challenging moments. Having got to this point I was now faced with the question 'where to start'? The tea was yet to arrive and I remembered the information gleaned from the system. This gave me my opening comment: '*I see that you have worked with Business Link before*'. I smiled and waited for a response. As I looked at him he folded his arms, leaned back a bit in his chair and in a withering tone, he replied '*Well, I have seen a number of advisers but I have never* ***worked*** *with them*!' This felt highly critical, and I was struck by the tone of Peter's comment about not working with advisers; did this mean he had no intention of working with me either? It was a very uncomfortable moment.

What this discomfort reminds me of is that in the adviser role, I was continually finding ways to keep conversation going. The follow up from an opening question is always unpredictable, and it can become a struggle to sustain exploratory conversation, particularly when the client looks unsure of whether the time and energy they are investing in the meeting is worthwhile. I

had been in a similar situation when I was visited by a consultant when working at CasanCo. I recall sitting there thinking '*Where are you trying to lead me with this*?', '*When will you get to the part where you tell me what this will cost*?' and '*Is this actually relevant to me*?' This is a way of understanding how we come to talk to ourselves as we would to another person (Burkitt, 2012). As humans, we have the capacity to reflect on our 'self' as if it were an object in the private conversation and role play that arise in social interaction. In the opening minutes of the meeting with Peter, and in his response to my initial question, I am sure that he was asking very similar questions of me. At the same time, I was asking myself '*Why did you agree to this meeting if you have had such a negative view of Business Link advisers*?'

This suggests how important it is in first meetings to get past the initial questions and find a way to go on together. It is often the case that there is an initially stilted 'tiptoeing' around in the opening discussions with a client, sensing threads of ideas that might take off and lead to a more engaged dialogue. I know that there is a desire on my part for conversation to become more fluid and responsive, as this reduces the initial anxieties around 'what's next'. Stacey's (2001a) description of conversation being a 'felt' experience resonates with me through his references to qualities of liveliness, fluidity and energy, but also in the feeling of grasping at meaning and coherence. In this relational experience I am aware that different voices are part of the conversation, and that our emotions are entangled in how we see ourselves and others (Burkitt, 2012). Lundquist Coey (2016) talks about her sense of discomfort when working as a consultant. She suggests her experience is one that reflects how we are caught up in the enabling and constraining tensions of power relations. In the moment of relating, each participant is influencing what will be possible in relation to the evolving situation (Shaw, 2002). As the meeting went on, I would liken my response to Peter as trying to find a way to shift away from similar discomfort.

Stacey (2003b) draws on the work of Norbert Elias, which focuses on sociogenetic (structural dimensions of social life) and psychogenetic (associated logical traits) aspects of human behaviour and how these develop together over time (Linklater and Mennell, 2010). Elias explores this in terms of a civilising process that evolves over centuries; he identifies these processes as patterns of interdependencies arising in locally situated social interaction. In *Society of Individuals*, Elias (2001) argues that, as individuals interact, power relations are shifting and evolving as they are simultaneously enabled and constrained by the values, beliefs and ideologies the individuals hold. In exploring practice, it is in conversation that these enabling constraints are shaping and shifting what happens next. It is in this process that meaning and understanding are negotiated in the exploration of inconsistencies and

discontinuities where identity and roles can be contested in this social process (Higgins et al., 2013a). This view of power is not fixed or equal. I recognise that sitting in the office of a client is a very different situation from a client visiting the offices of Business Link for a meeting. At the client's premises, where they are in familiar surroundings, there is an imbalance in power. I had a sense of discomfort sitting in Peter's office, thinking about his comment about not having 'worked' with advisers. Also, after my faltering start with the business card, and the pushback from Peter about not working with Business Link advisers, I did not feel that I had presented myself in a credible way up to that point. I did not feel powerless but I did feel that the balance of power was not in my favour. As I sat at the table there was a sense of closed-ness, and I had little idea how (or whether) this might shift to become something more open.

Self-organising themes and intentions arise in the unexpected twists and turns of meetings, which Palmer-Woodward (2007) explores as the ebb and flow of the patterning of conversation. This is never completely random and similarities and patterns can be recognised, however despite preparation prior to a meeting I could not anticipate what had come up regarding visits from my colleagues. With Peter, I felt I had nothing to lose. Rather than aiming to pursue increasing my credibility, I turned the question onto him, asking him if he had any questions about Business Link that would enable us to see if there was anything that might be of interest to him. It was a 'get out' question, really. Depending on his response, it could have been a way of moving to a more formal information-giving process and finding a way to leave before the two hours were up. Surprisingly, he took this as an opportunity to ask a direct question about the business context of Business Link and how it related to Exemplas, the company that ran the business support contract. I explained to him, as factually as I could, how the contract was set up, and how Exemplas managed services under what was ostensibly a 'brand' the government was using to offer business support to SMEs. I waited to see what he would say next. He relaxed, sat forward in his chair, and said '*Well, I suppose you would like to know more about the business?*' Later, as conversation became more open, he told me that he was on the board of another government-funded support initiative, the Manufacturing Advisory Service, hence his interest in business support. We discussed the similarities in our experience of these different initiatives, a development which had not seemed possible in the opening few minutes of our meeting.

As the ideas and threads of conversation evolve, there can be a shift to a more exploratory way of working, as happened here with Peter. As this happens, anxieties about 'what's next' reduce, and conversation flows more freely and with renewed vitality, as new ways of working together seem more possible. Peter's invitation to find out more about the business led to a shift in the

energy of the meeting. This is something that I have experienced in many meetings, and in making sense of this, I began to call this 'being let in', as a way of describing this shift in the energy of the conversation to a sense of being more connected and responsive. From a relational perspective, this shift is unpredictable and it can be fleeting. Although it is difficult to describe, this feeling is an emotional, bodily connection. In their research on advising, Dyer and Ross (2007:139) suggest something similar when they talk of how some advisers they interviewed became frustrated with their attempts to get clients to 'open up'. They conclude that these difficulties are created by disparate mindsets establishing a barrier that could not always be overcome. This suggests an external/internal dualism, and there is no suggestion of this taking place in a negotiated or co-created process, as with the experience of 'being let in' which could shift within the turn-taking/turn-making (Shaw, 2002) of ordinary advising conversation.

Unlike the power dynamics described in mainstream literature that assume more fixed relationships, I am taking up a view of power as fluid. As Stacey (2001a) mentions, when one person takes a turn, others are at that moment excluded from doing so, and this suggests a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. Elias and Scotson (1994) argue that this dynamic is ever-present in human interaction. Elias talks of power emerging in our interaction with others, suggesting that power is not an 'amulet' which is possessed by one person and not by another, but is rather a structural characteristic of human relationships (Elias, 1978:80). Sitting in Peter's office, in an unfamiliar environment, I was aware of how his initial comment about not working with advisers gave me a good sense of what 'not being let in' feels like. With Peter, the change in the nature of the discussion gave me a sense of relief, as he opened up to me by telling me about the history of the company and the issues and opportunities that he was facing in building the business. In order to get as much from this process as possible I drew a mind map as we talked, adding notes as I was struck by particular ideas. It was interesting, and as the company was successful and growing, the chance to build an ongoing relationship with him was attractive to me in relation to my role in the adviser team. Getting back to the office, I wrote up my summary and I sent an email to him. Within a few hours, a response came back. '*Yes, this covers all key points … however you are underestimating the profits in a particular part of the business'* and he corrected this. I was pleased that Peter responded so quickly and positively. He had suggested I come back for a follow-up visit, when he would show me around the company, giving me a better feel for what they did. We set a date, and a few weeks later, he gave me a tour of the business operations. I felt valued, and 'let in' by this response.

Perceptions, identity and role in business advising and consulting

I have tended to call myself an 'adviser'[1] when talking about my work with Business Link clients, although I recognise that this role encompassed a number of different activities. In the situation with Peter discussed here, advising is understood as emergent complex responsive processes that are difficult to fit into a particular description or role. In the literature, the terms 'advising' and 'consulting' are often used interchangeably, and in the management consulting literature, consulting activity is often referred to as 'advising'. Witzel (2015) suggests that it is the role of consultant to decide how their client is best served, and that they will be 'advising' them perhaps to carry on as before, or to seek innovative solutions that will help them become more financially and organisationally sustainable. There are some distinctions, however, that suggest a difference between Business Link advising and management consulting, specifically that consulting is usually contractual and requires the client to pay fees for the consultant's advice (Biech, 2011, Mughan et al., 2004, McKenna, 2001). For Business Link advisers, a difference between what they were delivering and 'consultation' was that the support they were offering was characterised as 'free at the point of delivery'. With services being free to the client, the cost of the adviser's time was being met from government funding allocated to the Business Link contract.

Offering free support has both benefits and challenges. A benefit is that it is more likely that a small-business client would agree to a meeting with an 'adviser', as many were reluctant and wary of agreeing to paid consultancy (Bennett and Robson, 1999b). This was particularly so if they were experiencing difficulties that were affecting their finances. The availability of grants can make a difference to the attractiveness of support (Ardley et al., 2016), making the opportunity to talk to someone without a charge more appealing. The challenge, however, is that in offering something for free expectations can be low, and the advice on offer can be perceived as having little potential value. A challenge also comes from the enabling constraints of monitoring and evaluating support, something discussed less frequently in consultancy literature.

There were a number of misconceptions regarding Business Link advisers, with reports suggesting that they were 'civil servants' (Richard, 2008) who had little understanding of the contexts of small firms. These general views, and the negative connotations of these ideas, were promulgated in the press and had some influence on the demise of Business Link services

[1] To situate my role as adviser I have noted that in consultancy literature there is often reference to the term spelled as 'advisor' (WITZEL, M. 2015. *Management Consultancy*, Routledge Ltd. Although I note here that my role was 'adviser'. rather than 'advisor' it seems that while the spelling of these terms differ the definitions are similar.

(Forte, 2011). These comments were unfounded at Business Link Hertfordshire, as none of the team had a civil servant background. These misconceptions, however, suggest that in client meetings there was a need to present oneself as someone who could accomplish an outcome or potential value for the client (Clark and Fincham, 2002, Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). This is recognised in both advising and consulting, where impression management is seen to be important, along with the idea of building trust and reputation (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). It was only in working with clients that these myths related to the negative perceptions of advisers could be dispelled.

My preference for using the title 'adviser' has some connection with how my sense of identity evolved from being recruited as a 'business adviser', a role that was printed on my business cards. Using the title of 'adviser' masks something of the ambiguity of a formal view of support, and this contrasts with what was taking place with the client. Mainstream management discourse tends to focus on advising and consulting in terms of business growth and profitability. There is a suggestion that 'management consultancy is a professional service which offers advice to businesses and other organisations on how to create value and achieve their goals' (Witzel, 2015:9). What strikes me here are the themes that are considered as essential to consulting practice, such as 'value', 'achieving goals', and discussion of 'efficient' and 'effective' behaviours. The literature suggests something similar to increase profitability for small-business clients (Audretsch, 2004, Mole, 2000, Robson and Bennett, 2000). This leads to a view of advising and consulting activity as taking an 'expert' perspective, suggesting a role of providing external 'advice' to the client that increases measurable growth. This view drove the evaluation processes to examine the cause-and-effect outcomes of particular advising interventions that could be related to increased business performance (Bennett and Robson, 2005, Mole, 2002a, Rigby and Ramlogan, 2013, Summon, 1998). There are many factors that affect small-business performance, and establishing causal linkages can be like 'searching for a needle in a haystack' (Hughes, 2009:118).

Tensions existed in my perception of the adviser role between a social understanding of practice and the requirement to deliver to predetermined outcomes and expectations which could be monitored against objectives. It is clear that it is difficult to evaluate 'soft' outcomes, but this does not mean that they do not exist, or that they are not important to clients (Ramsden and Bennett, 2005). In the world of Business Link evaluation there were inherent difficulties in measuring such things as client expectations and perceptions, because these depend on local client experience and knowledge 'which are difficult to assess and control for in comparisons' (Bennett, 2007:439). My argument is that it is this inherently social nature of business advising

that makes it difficult to measure, but does not mean that it is not important to understand practice. I recognise that the complexity of the advising situation, the context and heterogeneity of clients mean that it is impossible to make direct comparisons from which conclusions about the impact of advice can be drawn.

It is no wonder that ascertaining the value of business advising has been linked to the image of 'hunting the snark' (Hughes, 2009, Ardley et al., 2016):

> It involves the multi-pronged pursuit of a mythical animal (the snark) which gives the promise of all sorts of benefits if it can be ensnared. The snark, however, is elusive to capture and when it finally appears within grasp changes into something else (Hughes, 2009:114).

This illusiveness could be linked to the advising process in which, following an often long and complex meeting, the adviser and client would be expected to agree an action plan. This would be written up and sent back in a follow-up email, as happened following the meeting with Peter. There was always a disparity in how the twists and turns of the meeting could be reflected in the action plans, and in the information that would be updated on the CRM system. It was impossible to make cause-and-effect connections between actions plans and what happened next for the client. Although there was not always a follow-up meeting agreed, when going back to meet with a client it was often evident that changes had occurred that had some connection to the previous meeting; however, these were often nebulous and impossible to trace back to an individual action plan or piece of advice. There is little clarity therefore in the overall role of adviser. In exploring this tension between role and identity, there was a need to be responsive to what was coming up. This would be highly uncertain, with no clear understanding of what sense of role would arise in the conversation with the client. Simpson and Carroll (2008) suggest a functionalist view of 'role' comes from a systems-based perspective. They argue that the taking of a critical view of role 'can contribute to contemporary thinking on identity and identity construction' (ibid:33), and they suggest that the concept of identity is temporary and fluid. Here, I am paying attention to the idea of advising as a social process in which role and identity arise in the midst of a meeting rather than being predetermined in some way.

Critical perspectives on advising and consulting – challenging management metaphors

Hicks (2010) explores his experience of working for a large consulting firm. While this is different from the context of working with Business Link clients, I find similarities in my

practice with his struggle with the idea of the advising role being one of 'transferring knowledge'. He argues that the traditional models do not reflect his lived experience:

> Based on what I had read, I now believed that the approach of the traditional professions—and the consulting approach which closely followed it—was indeed seriously impaired. Perhaps moving some 'critical distance' away from traditional professionalism was not so bad! Yet I was not at all sure of what the alternative could be. I no longer believed, and still do not, for that matter, that knowledge is transferable from one client context or project to another; I no longer believed—even for the most technical of decisions of practice—that consultants (or physicians) ultimately turned to anything but their intuition and experience; I no longer believed it was possible for a consultant (or anyone else) to solve someone else's business problem (Hicks, 2010:47).

The use of metaphor here, talking of organisations as machines or organisms, is widespread in organisational consulting literature (Wiggins and Hunter, 2016). Hicks identifies problems in the traditional literature relating to consulting projects in which complex client issues evolve over much longer time frames than the consulting projects that address them. I also recognise what he problematises as the separation of the 'patient' and the 'cure', arguing that the 'physician' – here the expert consultant – cannot hand over a solution on behalf of the client like a doctor prescribing a pill.

It is common to see a medical metaphor related to business advice that supports a pathologising tendency in consulting theory. The categorisation of business problems relates to the identification of a particular client issue to which the consultant can provide a cure. This places the adviser, or consultant, in the role of some kind of doctor making a 'diagnosis' which can then be used to bring the organisational organism back to health (Mowles, 2011:4). This is echoed in Schein's view. In talking of his consultancy work, Schein (2003) stresses the importance of relationship building and he introduces his practice as a 'strategic improviser'. He gives the following as a sort of prescription:

> Always be a good listener, always let the client tell his or her story without interruption, never make premature recommendations, or maybe never make recommendations at all, maintain good eye contact, etc., etc. But as all experienced consultants have learned, if the client really expects you to be active, to say something, there is no point in remaining in the silent listener

> role. You will have to improvise, and you will have to rely on the here-and-now data that are at hand. Note once again: diagnosis and intervention are one and the same process and feed each other (Schein, 2003:81).

There are many 'diagnostic' processes through which the consultant develops solutions based on a set of tools (Clark and Fincham, 2002). This was a term that I often heard, with the word 'diagnostic' being used to describe what advisers should be doing when working with clients. I can understand Schein's sentiments regarding listening, however I am less comfortable in considering advising as a process of diagnosis and intervention; I have come to challenge this view, as it is quite limiting from a relational perspective. The 'diagnosis' approach suggests that there will be a defined problem to be solved, and that models are transferable from one context to another once the nature of the issue in question has been ascertained.

In public-funded business-support situations there can be an assumption of a 'clientification' process taking place (Hjalmarsson and Johansson, 2003). This reflects a power relationship being required for the take-up of support, in which a client is 'formed or forced as an advice-taker in the advising process', in order to be open to taking up the service (Hjalmarsson and Johansson, 2003:91). 'Clientification' is discussed in Foucault's writing on discourse, and drawing on ideas related to the medical metaphor it is suggested that:

> Central to Foucault's writings is how power technologies are related to discourse. By discourse Foucault means a historically generated idea that has permeated society … discursive practices go hand in hand with institutions, which are formed by the ideas of the experts. In this way Foucault (1983) shows how psychiatrists' ideas about mental illnesses form mental hospitals as well as mental hospitals form the ideas of the psychiatrists. For Foucault truth does not exist independent of power relations. Psychiatrists do not find the truth about mental illness; instead 'truths' about mental illness are produced through the interplay between discursive practices and institutions (Hjalmarsson and Johansson, 2003:92).

As a business adviser, I recognise something of this clientification process. With similarities to how power plays out between doctor/patient and consultant/client, the idea of clientification resonates with how business-support initiatives are developed, and how advisers are expected to integrate them into their work with clients. This view of power is one that both Elias (Elias and Jephcott, 1982), and Foucault (1982) explore, albeit from different perspectives. Foucault argues for an understanding of disciplinary power, observing that 'while the human subject is

placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations which are very complex' (Foucault, 1982:777). Foucault and Elias both talk of the shifting nature of power as emerging in the micro-practices of working together responsively (Clegg et al., 2004). The implications of this interpretation particularly apply to the role of adviser arising from policy initiatives, reflecting the way in which this origin influences how the role is perceived and performed.

Alvesson et al. (2009) argue that clients are often conceptualised in a static, simplistic way, with their individual context and needs being overlooked. There is some evidence of this in the Business Link model, which emerged from government policy that suggested how small firms *should* behave. The influences of policy are far reaching, and although they can be constraining they are also enabling. Taking up policy ideas unquestioningly can influence advising behaviours in a subtle and yet powerful way. To access funding, for example, there were always strict requirements and form filling which clients and advisers could find onerous. However, I am also aware that it was only through government funding that I was having the conversation with Peter and other clients, because of the taking up of policy though the Business Link contract. This is an example of how local and global factors are continuously influencing how we interact with others. We can never act autonomously, and it is in the vast number of local interactions that widespread patterns emerge (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). It is in the repetition of activities over long periods that social patterning can seem to acquire a sense of stability. However, these patterns are always open to transformation as individuals take them up in their day-to-day activities with others. These enabling constraints are notions that are seen dualistically in systems-based approaches in which actors have the capacity to choose a future position to work towards. Mowles (2015:6) suggests that the rationale for staying with the idea of paradox is that it pays attention to mutually informing and contradictory ideas that arise at the same time, and which 'may help us to understand how to act into the unknown'. The idea of local and global influences arising simultaneously is paradoxical, as in ongoing and free-flowing communication we experience these tensions of social patterning as ways of going on together. From a complexity perspective, no person can step outside these interactions to design or lead these changes, and evolution depends on how individuals take up these global patterns when working with others. This paradoxical understanding challenges the traditional view of the expert transferring knowledge to the client.

In recognising the taken-for-granted view of the medical theme in advising and consulting, I draw attention to how metaphor and analogies are often used implicitly in organisational studies. Hatch and Yanow (2008) identify that they can be used intentionally and semi-

consciously by theorists to draw a point or to question 'what does this bear similarity to?' Czarniawska (1999) suggests that metaphor can be a useful way of making sense of an argument, or for making some aspect of it more explicit. However, while this can be a powerful way of communicating an idea, far from being simply figures of speech or embellishments of spoken or written language, metaphors can function if unchallenged as organising principles of thought and experience (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008). There is a risk that metaphor can lead to meaning being detached from its constitutive context and losing the dynamic relationships of the original setting (Cornelissen et al., 2008). The use of systems-based assumptions, for example for understanding organisations, comes from biological sciences, using the metaphor of an organisation as an organism (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2016). The suggestion is that we can study the organisation separately from influences of the external environment that will impact on its evolution.

When drawing on biological metaphors, there is a sense of the idea of evolution as a unidirectional, bottom-up approach. This is something that Ridley (2015) talks about in his theory of the 'evolution of everything', in which he claims that evolution occurs from its own spontaneous momentum. In the literature of small firms that draws on evolutionary perspectives, a generalised view concludes that firms should try to improve adaptability as a capacity rather than as a process (Hodgson et al., 2017). What this and other approaches lack is a sense of the way that local behaviours are influenced by the global patterns that emerge from local interactions at the same time as global patterns are being formed by the many interdependent local interactions of individual agents. This becomes highly relevant when looking at support provided through government funding, but is also applies to support in other contexts.

Jackson (2003) talks of an alternative approach which draws on the idea of systems in engineering contexts. Here, organisational change can be isolated, with particular parts being identified and focused on by the consultant-adviser as 'engineer', as if the organisation is a machine that needs fixing. What this fails to consider is that these 'systems' contain social beings rather than machine parts. Jackson suggests that to overcome this, organisational purpose needs to be considered, and that by including humans in the study of systems multiple purposes can be identified and worked with. Ultimately, however, a choice has to be made regarding which of the systems of interest will bring the desired improvement. In promoting a process view of consulting, Schein talks of this in terms of systems:

> [What] I begin with is that all work with human systems, whether we call it contracting, scouting, data gathering, diagnosing, interviewing, testing,

> assessment, or surveying, is an intervention into that system … in other words, intervention is not only a reality but a necessity, and our models of consultation should be models of intervention (Schein, 2003:75).

This positions the systems designer as an objective observer of the system of interest. While a notion of social interaction is introduced here, it remains in the form of intervention in the human 'systems', and it is noticeable that any idea of change emerging as persons respond to one another is not considered.

Metaphors can serve the purpose of providing images that assist with a general understanding of patterns of organisational behaviour. I can understand why these models might be attractive, because of the way in which they can seem to simplify the complexities of 'live' organisations (Kast and Rosenzweig, 1972). My own interest in 'systems thinking' evolved as a response to the complex and challenging reality of making sense of what had happened at CasanCo. However, the practices of advisers and consultants described using medical metaphors (McKenna, 2001:201) or engineering models (Jackson, 2003) cannot be sustained without some reciprocal activity between client and consultant taking place to enable the processes of the practice to continue (Clark and Fincham, 2002). This might be why there is an overly simplistic view of the client prevalent in the literature. Stacey (2001a) draws attention to these models as 'abstractions', suggesting that the systems language prevalent in management and consulting literature limits discussion of situated local interactions. This can be problematic when making sense of the unique and unpredictable situations encountered.

Exploring themes of identity and recognition in advising practice

According to Palmer-Woodward (2007), the idea of the emergence of role and identity is frequently overlooked in the literature on consulting, and is therefore further considered in my reflection of advising practice. Although I had the title of adviser, I did not feel hugely confident about what this meant in practice, or about how I would achieve the expectations that I felt were implied by the title. I am talking here of how I came to the role at Business Link with personal experience of small-business contexts. Despite this, early in my advising career I felt less experienced than some of my colleagues. Although I had managed a dancing school and CasanCo for a number of years, I did not feel as legitimate as some of the other advisers who had more management experience than I did. This meant that I would often compare myself unfavourably to others. However, many of the team were from large corporate organisations and this gave them a very different understanding of what business advising and related activities should look like. In the Business Link team that I joined, several advisers came from

banking backgrounds, having taken redundancy when the banks were downsizing in the 1990s. Others had come from corporate management careers. Connor, an adviser that I worked closely with in my first two years as an adviser, had many years of corporate management experience, similar to Jonathan, the adviser I had worked with when I was at CasanCo. I noticed that advisers often used management language that I was fairly unfamiliar with, which at the time I saw as a weakness in my approach. In comparison with my own experience of small businesses, these people all seemed to be more 'professional' than I was.

This brings to mind a particular adviser, Colin, who started shortly after me, and who proudly related on a number of occasions that he had been '*responsible for introducing significant technology in the food industry'*. I felt that he saw himself as possessing 'expert' knowledge that he was keen not only to pass on to SME clients, but also to use to 'improve' the way the adviser team functioned. Colin asked to come out on a visit with me to a client, as part of a team initiative in which we were to 'share' our experience. I began the meeting but he took over part of the way through, sidelining me, which I found extremely annoying. After the meeting he informed me, in a way that I perceived as condescending, that business managers did not want the exploratory type of conversation I was encouraging. He said that advising required getting to the point, finding out the facts and finding the solutions. At the time I found Colin's behaviour irritating, but I did not confront him despite my frustration. The contrast between the ways he and I felt most comfortable working perhaps reflects our different backgrounds. Coming from a small-business background, I was interested in the unique and individual situations into which I was being invited. It seems that Colin and some other advisers felt more comfortable staying with a more corporate style of working, which worked for some clients but not for others.

I have reflected since on this relationship between myself and the mostly male members of the team. Sennett (2001) talks about experience of identity and failure using the example of programmers he met who were laid off in the downsizing of IBM in 1990s. In finding themselves out of work, they discussed this within their group, reflecting with others including Sennett in the conversation, in making sense of what had happened to them. They had believed that their jobs at IBM were protected. They struggled with their identity in what was initially a narrative of organisational and personal failure using the language of betrayal and anger. I recognise my experience of similar challenges in joining Business Link following the closure of the company with which I was struggling. In a similar way to Sennett's relating of his interaction with the IBM managers to themes of failure, I saw CasanCo as a personal failure, and I would not have wanted to share this with others. My reluctance to challenge Colin at the

time suggests that, while I might be talking of individual practice, I cannot separate my 'self', from others, and that this mediates my choice of actions. Perhaps I felt intimidated by Colin's proclamation of senior corporate experience, but I was also responding to a lack of confidence in my own abilities so soon after closing down CasanCo. I was dealing with emotions such as anger that others had not been willing to work with me in finding ways to do things differently. I also felt shame about making the decision to walk away. I have wondered since whether there were similar emotions that stayed with the advisers from their corporate careers that had often been shortened through redundancy. Wenzel (2012) suggests that consultants can get caught up in taken-for-granted assumptions derived from the dominant managerial discourse of efficiency and purposefulness. It is in these conversational processes that our identity forms (Shaw, 2002). Colin's recommendation to me to follow a particular approach with clients was based on an ideology that reflected his experience and corporate background. My approach was vindicated to some extent as I found out on returning to the office that Colin had been one of the advisers that Peter had chosen not to work with.

What I understand now is that in the everyday, complex, responsive processes of relating there is always the potential for conflict, which Mowles (2015) suggests arises between people trying to get things done together. This conflict reflects the paradox of cooperation and competition. My experience with CasanCo, which early in my advising career was still quite recent, had left me with feelings of disappointment, and also a sense of failure. I had been relieved to get the job as an adviser with Business Link, at least partly because it was regular income for me as a provider for the family. I also felt that working with clients would allow me to help others in a way that I had not been able to help myself. The idea here of the emergence of values in practice links to the concept of ethics and working towards the 'good'. Mowles (2011) suggests that when, in our interactions with others, there is a connection with our values, an enlarged sense of self arises. This exemplifies how our understanding of the self gives a sense of meaning to life and offers new opportunities for action (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). In contrast to feelings of failure, Business Link had proved a lifeline for me; it gave me an income, but it also gave me a role and a ready source of clients to work with. I felt that I had the opportunity of giving something back, almost to make amends in some way for what had happened. I had not considered that for many advisers Business Link possibly offered them a sense of purpose that they had lost when they moved out of the highly structured corporate world.

Paying attention to what was important to me when advising creates a sense of differentiation between self and other that arises as I explore individual practice. Finding ways to fit in with the team, I would often get into conversation with other advisers to find out how they worked,

or to discuss client meetings. Samuel Crawford, who had started on the same day as me at Business Link, was one of the advisers I enjoyed talking to, as he had international experience in high-value consulting and project management. He had decided to walk away from his consultancy role, and was often surprised by, and interested in, the small businesses that he was now required to work with. It was interesting to hear about his practice, and to discuss information that was relevant to clients. I continued to draw on his ideas, as discussed in Chapter 8.

I have to confess to feeling some sense of satisfaction when I read on the CRM system that Colin, who had been so vocal in telling me how to work with clients, had not been successful in working with Peter. This is not to suggest that one approach is better than another, as this would imply a prescription for advice that lies outside the adviser–client relationship. The way I now understand this is that the roles that arise in the advising relationship are not fixed, and, as Hicks et al. (2009) point out, we are simultaneously *creating* our role through practice that is considered valuable by clients. The outcomes of this process cannot be anticipated in advance. From this perspective, I suggest that how we are recognised as advisers arises in relationship with clients, and that what works in one situation, with one particular client or adviser, may not work in another. At MSB Ltd, I had been trying to make sense of shifting dynamics, and feeling less than confident that we would find a way of going on together. Peter's remark about having chosen *not* to work with previous advisers reminds me that advising practice is often challenging, carrying with it the risk of rejection. However, when Peter asked '*So do you want to know what we do here*?' I had a sense of relief that we had moved into a more exploratory conversation, and that I had, to some extent, been recognised by him in a way that had not happened in his previous meetings with advisers.

These themes suggest that recognition is not inherent in the role or title that we may have as advisers but arises in the act of communication itself (Stacey et al., 2000). George Herbert Mead comes from the American pragmatist tradition, from which perspective he argued (Mead, 1934) that a position of knowledge and learning arises in communicative interaction between human bodies. Honneth (1995:71) draws on Mead's social psychology to explore recognition as 'a mode of practical relation-to-self in which one can be sure of the social value of one's identity'. His argument was that we could only recognise our 'self' in relation to others. Palmer-Woodward (2007) also draws on Mead's work, suggesting that her experience of consulting is of co-created conversation where she cannot stand outside the relationship and remain unchanged. She goes on to describe how the emotional, relational and occasionally messy nature of consulting leads to an emerging sense of self. Working with clients often gave me this

same sense, and in discussing his practice as a management consultant, Wenzel similarly suggests the importance of his experience of the sense of recognition when working as a consultant:

> Participation will lead to a struggle over issues in which people exchange opinions and debate their meaning; being an accepted member of this group … foster[s] a feeling of recognition and so raises a person's self-esteem (Wenzel, 2012:31).

In adopting a social perspective, the construction of identity from the ebb and flow of conversation occurring between individuals is highlighted, rather than its being something that, once gained, remains stable (Griffin and Stacey, 2005).

Over the next four years, Peter and I continued to meet regularly. It is difficult to say how this was 'advising' specifically. There were some tangible outcomes, including the identification of support for exporting that funded research into new markets he was considering. We also carried out a benchmarking diagnostic process to look at how the company compared to others in the sector. But mostly, our two-hour meetings were a chance to reflect on what was happening in the business, and to discuss whatever was particularly of importance to him, with topics coming to light as we talked. During this process, I gained an understanding of the complexities of a growing chemical distribution company from privileged information that Peter would share. This sense of being included in conversation resonates with the way in which we gain an increased sense of self-worth when we are recognised (Honneth, 1995). My confidence grew over this time, as well as my understanding of a very different type of business to CasanCo. I was not left unchanged by this experience; it continued to influence my evolving practice in terms of how I saw myself in relation to the team and how I would go on to work with other clients.

Drawing on the analogy of complexity sciences to understand advising practice as social

I have discussed how I initially felt lacking in the 'professional' management skills of colleagues as I worked with clients; however, I did have experience of managing CasanCo. This became particularly relevant when working with clients experiencing similar stresses in managing the complexity of their businesses. At CasanCo I had felt that I was responsible not just for myself but for others, and there were very few people that I could talk to about the anxieties of day-to-day issues. This led to a deeply held feeling that, when I took up the role of adviser, I wanted to help others to avoid some of the pitfalls that I had struggled with. Initially I had not reflected on this aspect of my practice, but as I considered it further, I recognised how

the context of the adviser becomes intertwined in conversation with the contexts of his or her clients. This is a very different understanding to the view of that was discussed at Business Link team meetings of advising as an 'intervention' in an organisational system. These meetings were more focused on targets, initiatives and general tensions between advisers in the team than on what might be happening in client meetings. Because this was the language understood in these meetings, I tended to fall into similar ways of talking myself. I was uncomfortable sharing my feelings, as I thought my conversational way of working sounded quite 'flaky' compared to the ways of working my colleagues (who were mostly male) spoke of, particularly in light of Colin's summing up of my approach.

In everyday social interaction we continuously make sense of the world using generalisations. This is how I understand what I and others were doing in team meetings in taking up ideas related to management theory, drawing on systemic ideas of organisations and organisational change. However, Stacey (2012) suggests that the risk of getting caught up in these abstractions is in forgetting that they are generalisations separated from local contexts. Barad (2007) describes something similar when she talks of being in the world as 'entanglement', challenging notions of causality that are assumed in traditional scientific theory. Stacey (2007b:295) supports this view, saying that when organisational practitioners and researchers talk and write about an 'organisation', no matter what perspective they take they are mostly talking about groupings of people engaged in some kind of joint activity that has some purpose. Barad (2007) goes on to say that it is only in a process of continuing 'intra-activity' that we construct reality. She says that 'all real living is meeting. And each meeting matters' (ibid:353). Although I did not think of this in the initial meeting with Peter, finding ways to go on together as joint enquirers means staying with the 'experience of not knowing' (Shaw, 2002:33). In bringing entangled threads of ideas to mind as I talk about my work as an adviser, I realise the limitations of systems-based approaches in reflecting this understanding of the everyday practice of advising. Staying with experience suggests a different understanding: one that finds ways of staying with uncertainty and unpredictability.

The experience of working with Jonathan in my role at CasanCo had led me to feel that systems-based approaches left little opportunity for explorations outside the models and frameworks he used. It was not a sudden shift, but as I reflected on our work together, I had become critical of how these systems-based ideas suggested prescriptions for support. Antonacopoulou and Chiva (2007) talk of the importance of recognising social complexity, where exploring the diversity and interdependence of individuals reveals tensions relating to how learning emerges as we negotiate and interact. I would argue now that the evolution of my approach over time into

something more exploratory and conversational was a way of overcoming frustrations of this complexity being overlooked. This dissatisfaction with systems-based views of advising led me to explore complexity science as an approach offering an alternative view of organisations and change.

In 2006, I attended a five-day workshop that presented 'six principles of complexity', and which had been set up to encourage participants to explore alternative ideas of organising[2]. These complexity principles are themes that reflect the shifting and dynamic patterning of everyday life. Webb et al. (2005) characterise these principles as:

- Self-organisation and emergence
- The edge of chaos
- Diversity
- History and time
- Unpredictability
- Pattern recognition

At the time, these ideas served the purpose of encouraging me to question my view of systems-based thinking. They drew my attention to understanding organisations as 'adaptive' in the way that Dooley (1997) and others (Carlisle and McMillan, 2005, Cilliers, 1998, Marion, 1999) have referred to as 'complex adaptive systems' shortened to CAS. I had completed my OU degree by this time, had met with Peter Conway, and was exploring themes related to small business in a Masters by Research degree at Manchester Metropolitan University. I was pleased that the CAS ideas provided me with a way of talking about organisations that reflected something of the complexity that I had experienced. Peter (who himself had a PhD in chemistry and was therefore perhaps open to engaging in new ways of understanding organisations) was interested, and we discussed complexity ideas. In a spirit of enquiry he gave permission for me to use the organisational situation at MSB Ltd as a case study for my MRes dissertation (Andrews, 2006). Rather than looking at advising as such, I ended up investigating the organisation itself in terms of complexity, considering whether this approach might then help to understand advising practice as a response to this form of organisational patterning. I did not situate myself in the complex system I was investigating.

[2] Run at Cranfield University in 2006. This is an example of entanglement, as I met Yasmin Imani there, who subsequently became one of my supervisors.

Because the 'principles' on which CAS ideas are based are interconnected and form the basis of dynamic and complex organising behaviours they are not to be taken as individual concepts that stand alone. This perspective draws on the work of natural scientists, in particular those working at the Santa Fe Institute (Waldrop, 1993). CAS adapt through 'self-organisation' arising from the responsive interdependency of agents or individuals, leading to unpredictable and emergent outcomes (Carlisle and McMillan, 2005, Dooley, 1997). These ideas have influenced management literature as a way of addressing the challenges of uncertainty and unpredictability in traditional management models. Pascale (1999) argues that for an entity to qualify as a CAS it must meet four criteria. In summary, these criteria are that, firstly, it must be composed of many agents acting in parallel – in other words, it must not be hierarchically controlled. Secondly, it will continuously shuffle these building blocks and generate multiple levels of organisation and structure from them; thirdly, it will reflect the second law of thermodynamics by exhibiting entropy and thus winding down over time unless replenished with energy – in this sense, CAS are vulnerable to death, something taken up in ideas of management theory related to strategic drift (Johnson et al., 2008). The final distinguishing characteristic is that all CAS exhibit a capacity for pattern recognition and employ this to anticipate the future, taking on a life of their own because they have the capacity to observe themselves. In Pascale's (1999) view, there is an implication that CAS exist as entities rather than being ongoing and relational in nature. This is an issue to be considered in terms of how a CAS approach might reflect management issues, as a separation is implied between the organisation and the management of change.

In the development of CAS, computer programs were set up to run with interacting 'agents' following simple rules, thus creating a variety of patterning that reflected chaotic and highly stable behaviours simultaneously. Researchers developed programs in which some agents were subject to rules that introduced an element of selection. These interdependent agents became highly adaptive, with the effect that over time, as the programs ran, outcomes that resembled 'living' systems were created. This formed the basis of CAS theory. CAS ideas reflect key principles of complexity that are not recognised in general systems theory. These include individual 'agents' acting at a local or micro level, exhibiting responsive pattern recognition and a capacity to learn without there being a blueprint for determining predictable (global) outcomes. Schneider and Somers (2006) suggest that the spontaneity of this self-organising process is similar to the concept of emergence found in Prigogine's work on dissipative structures (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). There are also some similarities with unpredictability as addressed in the chaos theory associated with Lorenz (1972). It was in Lorenz's work exploring evolving weather patterns that the sensitivity to initial conditions was

recognised that makes complex systems unpredictable but not random. It was Lorenz who suggested that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil could lead to a tornado in Texas. Waldrop (1993) differentiated CAS activity from chaos theory, in which the basic principle is that simple rules can lead to intricate behaviours of entities such as fractals. Chaos, he says, does not explain the self-organising cohesiveness of complex systems. As Waldrop suggests:

> Every one of these complex, self-organising, adaptive systems possesses a kind of dynamism that makes them qualitatively different from static objects such as computer chips or snowflakes, which are merely complicated. Complex systems are more spontaneous, more disorderly, more alive than that (Waldrop, 1993:11-12).

Kauffman, working at the Santa Fe Institute at the same time as Waldrop, described the selection process undertaken by many individual agents as being like a 'law of motion—a force that is constantly pushing emergent, self-organising systems toward the edge of chaos' (Waldrop, 1993:303).

CAS ideas resonated with my experience, but when I had completed the complexity workshop, I was still unsure about the difference between 'systems' as referred to in systems thinking (Checkland, 1985) and 'systems' as addressed in the topic of 'complex systems'. I sent an email to Peter Allen, who had been a contributor to the teaching at the workshop. Peter, who had worked with the Nobel prize winner Ilya Prigogine on dissipative structures (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984), responded to my question and spoke of his understanding of the evolutionary nature of 'complex systems':

> The complex system has some additional 'power' to transform itself over time, which is not visible in the System at any given time. That power is hidden in its internal diversity and internal heterogeneity … its internal non-averageness. This gives an evolutionary power to a complex system (extract from email, Allen, 2006).

This made sense to me at the time and served as a useful introduction to more complex ways of understanding change. These ideas of patterning associate self-organisation with emergence, adaption and evolution (Fuller and Moran, 2001). Although Peter Allen's (2006) explanation continues to use the term 'systems', albeit complex ones, it made me want to explore the concept further, as it led to new ways of understanding the organisational complexity that I was caught up with.

I would argue now that CAS principles are useful for understanding general ideas of dynamic unpredictability. However, in applying these ideas directly in my MRes dissertation I became less comfortable with this approach as an explanation of advising practice as situated interaction arising between individuals in local interaction. I have already discussed the problems of the unchallenged use of metaphors and analogies in management theory. I understand that it is a substantial leap from thinking about weather patterns, or CAS, to considering organisations; however, some theorists do take a view that it is possible to transfer concepts and ideas directly from the natural sciences to the context of social science. In an interview with Powell (2006), Pascale argues for a metaphysical understanding of organisations when he says that 'organisations are living things. This is not a metaphor. It is the way it is. Acceptance of this self-evident fact represents a huge step for corporate leaders – one that most have not made' (Powell, 2006:978). Obolensky (2014) and Collinson and Jay (2012) also fall into this trap, linking the idea of self-organisation emerging out of local diversity to something that needs to be harnessed. This can suggest that working with complexity is a matter of management control:

> Boundaries exist in every organisation. The issue is how boundaries can be managed in a way which enables freedom to act without complete chaos on the one hand, and not stifle initiative and flexibility on the other (Obolensky, 2014:119).

This suggestion of organisational boundaries as fixed and open to manipulation is similar to their use in systems thinking. In Obolensky's case, his solution to managing complexity is that it is a leadership problem, and the leader is required to 'let go', allowing followers to take the initiative.

These ideas have limitations when applied to the fluid nature of social situations, and Fuller and Moran (2000), who apply these ideas to small businesses, argue for CAS approaches which go beyond metaphor. By overlooking the assumptions that relate to the original context of a theory, the gap between the metaphor (or theory) and experience is overlooked, for example in the way that chaos theory and CAS emerged from the rise of computer-based modelling. As Waldrop (1993) explains in his narrative of the development of complexity theory at Santa Fe, this only became possible with the introduction of more powerful computing technology in the work being carried out there. In taking these ideas forward in social contexts and in relation to human interaction, it is often forgotten that CAS can never be separated from the history of computer programming (and the computer programmers themselves) from which the theory

evolved. However, drawing on these models changes the focus towards agentic activity and has enabled new ways of talking about a processual view of organisational activity.

From the perspective of interpersonal neurobiology, Siegel (2001) has taken an interest in how complexity theory explains the development of the brain as a self-organising social process. Drawing on CAS theory, he suggests that human relationships involve principles of complexity within collaborative, contingent forms of emotional communication from which our understanding of mind arises. He suggests this is not an enskulled experience but one that arises in and between individuals. This view challenges bounded systems, and from this perspective there is no grand superstructure or system independent of what people do together; this is a radically social view of organisational activity (Mowles, 2011). From this perspective, 'acts of communication, relations of power, and the interplay between people's choices arising in acts of evaluation' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005:2) lead to the emergence of 'organisation', which can be seen as interaction iteratively creating further interaction.

There is not space here to give a full overview of complexity theories, however, the recognition of learning emerging in everyday relations with others is one that is inherently complex. I realise now that although my use of CAS ideas was quite limited, they started me thinking about experience. Having come to talk about my work arising in conversation there was little opportunity of developing this further with these complexity ideas. Unlike the mainstream view of advising, complex responsive processes of relating offered an alternative view that resonated with my practice. Stacey (2001a) takes up CAS ideas as a source domain and provides a different way of transferring insights from the complexity sciences to human action by way of analogy. He introduces other relational theories of Mead (1934) and Elias (Elias, 1956, Elias and Jephcott, 1982, Elias and Scotson, 1994) to enable the understanding of organisational activity as complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey et al., 2000). These alternative views move away from ideas taken from systems thinking towards those of paradox, which Stacey et al. (2000) talk of particularly in relation to the paradox of a recognisable but unknowable future. This focuses attention on the way in which 'ordinary everyday conversations between people are perpetually creating the future, based on past experience, in the present, in the form of shifting patterns of communication and power relations' (Stacey in MacIntosh et al., 2013:244).

It made more sense to me to talk about conversation as ongoing, complex responsive processes, where we structure experience through the narratives we share with others. In this way we are constructing knowledge together, in a process of perpetual construction rather than, for example, in the fixed form of knowledge generated in scientific method (Stacey et al., 2000).

Validity comes from whether narratives resonate with others, rather than in some fixed universal 'proof'. In thinking of social interaction in this way, the question becomes 'if there is no blueprint for organisational activity that lies outside our social interaction what might this mean for practice?'

I started making connections with these ideas when I was working with clients. Although I was not talking about complexity ideas explicitly in client meetings, I recognised how they resonated with particular problems or challenges that came up in talking about small-business activity with clients. In exploring practice when working with clients as complex responsive processes of relating, I could reflect on connections with the ongoing tensions between local interaction, my past experience, the enabling and constraining influences of policy and the contractual requirements of the adviser role, as these aspects played out in the moment of relating. When understood from this perspective there is no linear process of thinking then acting, only the paradox of a potentially recognisable yet unknowable future, and this resonated with my experience.

Summary and key ideas

In concluding this chapter, I focus on the unpredictability of client meetings and the challenges of sustaining meaningful conversation. I was not unchanged by this experience; conversation about the business informed further conversation with Peter and with other clients, revealing advising as an evolutionary process in which each new experience brings further learning. I am reminded that it is in the turn-taking and turn-making process that a sense of flow can lead to a more exploratory discussion. In identifying the sense of 'being let in', I see this as an opportunity for a particular form of conversation to develop. In this relational process I am aware of the emergence of the identity in the form of 'self and other' which arises in conversation. This forms a critique of the ways in which the role of adviser and consultant are understood in the traditional literature as a particular role rather than as something transient and negotiated. I am also mindful that I might call myself an adviser, but this does not mean that others will accept me in this way. Taking up general ideas of complexity theory offered a way for me to begin talking about a radically social experience of advising. My understanding has been informed by complex responsive processes of relating. This has led to the development of the ideas in this thesis, and to the evolving research methodology that will be taken up in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Exploring research as reflective and reflexive practice

Introduction

In this chapter, I set out the method used in this research. This method has evolved from curiosity about my experience of advising practice, and from the realisation that traditional literature related to business advising did not reflect my experience. I examine the approach taken to address these concerns, and explore alternative ways of researching practice, which I now understand as being both social and situated. I demonstrate that by taking an iterative approach conclusions and contributions that reflect new ways of understanding practice have emerged. I locate my thinking within existing traditions of thought, and in doing so I point to the way that my thinking has evolved over time, through extensive reading and through dialogue with colleagues and supervisors in my research community.

Exploring the evolution of the research process

Reflections on my work as an adviser and my research are interlinked. I understand now that practice, whether as a researcher or as an adviser, is both highly social and complex, and this has been evident in this research. Reflecting on his work as a management consultant, Christensen (2005) makes a similar connection, identifying that the activities of research and consultation are themselves complex responsive processes of relating. He draws attention to how all everyday interactions are ongoing complex responsive processes. He differentiates everyday interaction from research practice, in which the 'main intention is to study the processes of relating themselves in such a way that my study will be accepted as research in a community of others' (ibid:99).

This gives a deeper meaning to my evolving understanding of the interconnection between research and advising practice. When I began exploring my experience of advising, a recurring theme was that it was 'all about conversations', however, this could apply to all aspects of social experience. As my research has progressed, I have realised the similarities between the reflective methods I have been encouraged to use in my PhD group and my relationships with clients and colleagues. This deepening understanding of practice involves communicative interaction, power relating, and ethical choices.

In 2009, I joined the PhD research group at the Complexity and Management Centre (CMC) at UH. This feels like a starting point for the evolution of my research methods, although the challenge of starting points, as Dalal (2002:223) says, is that 'wherever one starts, something has gone before'. It is impossible to say at what point I began to question and examine my practice, as my involvement in business activities had encouraged me to reflect on practice

before I considered taking up the PhD. In 2008, I had come to work at UH as a visiting lecturer teaching strategy. My previous study had ended and I had heard about the work of the CMC. I went along to one of the workshops out of curiosity. This was a tentative approach to find out more about the work on complexity being pursued at UH. Something about the energy and dynamics of the session struck a chord with me and I talked to Dr Dorothea Noble, the organiser of these sessions; this led to an invitation to attend meetings of the CMC PhD research group.

In the previous chapter, I described the ways in which I had become interested in complexity theories and then took up CAS ideas in my master's dissertation, using MSB Ltd as the focus of the research. Although I had been working with these complexity ideas, I had been uncertain about how I might further develop them in research into advising. The email I had sent to Peter Allen (Chapter 2), in which I asked for clarification of the differences between systems thinking and complex systems, demonstrates that while I had a continued interest in these ideas I also had some reservations. While the CAS approach had given me some general insights into the dynamic nature of organisational behaviours, I could not see how to apply these ideas to reflect my work as an adviser. In CAS, agents are seen as basic 'building blocks' (Dooley, 1997:85), and these might take the form of a cell in a biological system, a seller or buyer in an economic system, or an individual in an organisational system. CAS represents abstract notions used to explain interaction, evolution and change in bounded systems. Being introduced to the complexity approach developed by the CMC was to develop more thoroughly the way I understood the social nature of advising. I had already begun to question systemic ideas, and the complexity approach developed by Stacey and colleagues at UH provided an alternative understanding of organisational activity from a social perspective.

I recognise a movement of thought that has taken place over the course of my studies. Systems-based assumptions are prevalent in researching organisations and are commonly found in the literature related to business advising. Often, research on advice takes place against an idealised view of organisations based on growth and profitability. In the literature on government-funded business advice, the adviser is seen to be undertaking interventions to improve organisational systems while standing outside the organisational boundary (Chrisman, 1999, Robson and Bennett, 2000). As I began to explore my practice, I had to consider how I was caught up in ongoing interactions. The generalised view of the adviser role suggests that there can be some standardisation of approach; however, I could not take a detached view in which adviser activity was seen as separate from the client–adviser relationship. In taking a narrative approach, conversation is local, contextualised, and related to what is taking place in the living present. By paying attention to experience, I could reflect on how I was simultaneously being influenced

and influencing what was under discussion. I had not considered this type of involvement when applying CAS to the MSB Ltd case study. I had chosen to undertake an in-depth interview with Peter (Chapter 2), and from this, I drew conclusions on adaptive organisational behaviour, with the view that this could inform how others understood SMEs. There are distinct assumptions that underlie this approach, and in paying attention to these, I recognise I was making the following assumptions:

- Organisations are bounded wholes that respond to a complex environment
- I can make sense at an organisational level without considering the ongoing local interaction of interdependent individuals taking place in the present
- As a researcher or practitioner I can stand outside process, as an observer who can make judgements about what is going on that can be generalised as a model for others to use

A criticism of CAS is that an interpretive process is needed to explain the complexity of human interaction, and that such interaction cannot be understood by directly applying ideas from the natural sciences to social contexts (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). It follows that in everyday life, unlike in the activity of computer-simulated agents in CAS, there is no equivalent of a programmer guiding human relating. I now recognise how these assumptions place limitations on the exploration of advising as a conversational process; however, I did not make a sudden leap from one way of thinking to another. In undertaking the PhD, my research method and my understanding of advising have evolved together, developing an awareness of the social perspective of advising that I discuss in this thesis.

Working in the context of a research community

I had taken up the invitation to join the CMC PhD research group not knowing what to expect, and so coming into this established setting was somewhat daunting. However, the openness of the discussion and the welcome extended to me as a new member were encouraging. The group of researchers I joined all drew on complexity theories in their work, and were at different stages of their PhD studies. Initially, I talked to the group about researching 'business advising' by drawing on my experience as a Business Link adviser: I had put a boundary around the research topic. At the time, I was working part-time at UH, with the other part of my working week being spent with Business Link as an adviser working with clients. I felt that I had something to say about business advising that would challenge the literature that, to me, appeared to pay little attention to the practice of advising, and which therefore did not 'ring true'. In the PhD group, we were encouraged to write narratives as a way of developing reflection and exploring meaning. As my advising work with Business Link was concurrent, I

would talk of situations that had struck me or stayed in my mind. Being encouraged to work in this way opened up new ideas about how to explore my practice.

Bochner (2001:134) argues that in taking a narrative turn in research we move away from singular accounts to those that are open to broader interpretation; away from establishing facts and towards meanings; and away from master narratives to local stories. This approach points to the way in which narratives are central to human understanding in these local stories, and to the way in which we are enmeshed in the stories we create to explain experience (Bolton, 2006). As we reflect, our knowledge and understanding transform in the narrative-like structuring of human experience:

> It is not simply that people are telling each other stories or that narrative is simply an alternative type of knowledge. The turn-taking, responsive relating of people may be thought of as forming narrative at the same time as that narrative patterns moral responsibility and turn-taking. (Stacey, 2010:76).

Narrative is therefore a way of paying attention to the local and micro interactions that we are all engaged in, and this is important because it is from these interactions that wider organisational patterns can be understood (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). This suggests that when taking a reflexive approach the writing and sharing of narrative is vital to bringing different perspectives to the sense-making process (Warwick and Board, 2012).

My narratives form the 'raw material' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005:9) from which themes have emerged for further reflection. Where, on re-reading, points of interest have struck me, and in the light of comments from colleagues, further reflections and aspects have been brought in to my writing. I recognise that the deeper meaning of experience can be overlooked until I reflect upon it. As this research has evolved, the iterative process of working on and reworking the narratives has enabled two interconnected processes to occur. The first is an exploration of the ways in which my life history shapes the narrative experiences I am writing about; the second is the exploration of the connections that exist between these narrative experiences and broader theoretical and research contexts, from which further sense can be made.

Working with narrative brings challenges in terms of presenting not only the 'what' of the writing but also the 'how' and the 'why'; however, these challenges also present opportunities to deepen understanding by questioning how narrators *construct* themselves in their writing (Bruner, 2004). We cannot step outside ourselves to study something that constitutes who we are, but as humans we do have the power to reflect on why we think in particular ways. My perspective here reflects that of Hendry (2007), who suggests that although we *are* our

narratives, we must be aware of the need to question our relationships to our own stories. She suggests (ibid:496) that 'in this sense we become present to our relationships and interconnections with others'. Orr and Bennett (2009) suggest that this approach is different from that of researchers who advocate using the narratives of others in a way that makes them bodies of text for analysis between researchers and their subjects. Over time, there were numerous reasons for my writing of particular narratives, and while some of these reasons have remained as themes in this study, others have fallen by the wayside. Warwick and Board (2012) use the metaphor of granite outcrops to reflect how the iterative process would give some solidity to the themes of narratives. They talk of how, as they shared their work with others, some details became eroded by the sharing process. Similarly, I found that some narrative ideas remained stubbornly in the overall thesis although I did not always know why this was so until later in the iterative process. In the working and reworking, I found that, rather than being eroded as suggested by the granite metaphor, ideas evolved and took on different meanings as they shifted in the light of experience. In this way, it feels more as though they are woven into a tapestry of experience than that they take on the solidity of rock.

Developing an understanding of working reflexively

When I joined the PhD group, I was quite hesitant about sharing my stories and my points of view. However, over time I understood that it was only through exploration, disagreement and challenge that my thinking evolved, reflecting Mowles (2017a) view as presented in his article on research communities. Mowles further suggests that a research group is a temporary organisation wherein meaning emerges in the back-and-forth interplay of conversational themes. The sharing of narratives, speaking thoughts out loud and responding to the thoughts of others provide opportunities to make sense of ideas, and in working with the group, I found that the discussions moved my thinking in unpredictable ways. In the dynamics of the group experience, there are opportunities to make sense of the here and now of conversation arising between participants. Being challenged to respond and defend one's thinking in particular ways presents a chance to think about the assumptions being made, and what led to these assumptions. While here discussing specifically the evolution of my research method, I am also aware that a similar process occurred in my working with clients.

Reflexive practice can be described as engaging in thoughtful and conscious self-awareness, which Finlay (2002b) suggests is the environment in which the researcher has the opportunity to review what they are doing. Conversational patterns and similarities can arise that help in sense-making and further exploration. This suggests ideas of parallel processing taken from neuroscience that help to explain how new meanings come from working with discourse and

language from our socialisation (Burkitt, 2012). A similar theme is the way in which paying attention to working as an adviser can raise awareness of the stories of others, this having the effect of 'transference' (Mowles, 2017a:11) in which the exploratory process triggers particular ideas and memories. These can become points of reference that energise the conversation by illuminating similarities and differences in experience; however, the ideas of others can also evoke memories of past relationships and thus may call out repeating patterns of behaviour. This awareness of transference highlights the risk of unconsciously becoming caught up in particular behaviours, resulting in solutions being transferred from one context to another. Miller (2004) writes about her work with students, and how her anxieties about wanting them to do well led to an overpowering need to 'fix' their situations. I have felt similar desires when working with clients; in contrast, there are times when a client might look to me to bring in a fix, and this could be equally uncomfortable. This is an example of counter-transference, in which, rather than creating a space for more open conversation, the adviser might respond in order to feel they are being helpful (Miller, 2004). In being aware of this risk, I am mindful that situations will differ, and that there are no prescriptions for advice; it is not always easy to recognise this until one takes the opportunity to reflect.

In this research, reflection and reflexivity are interconnected ideas that enable me to pay attention to, and to learn from, my practice. Mowles (2015:71) suggests that reflection and reflexivity does not necessarily lead to increased insight and understanding, although he makes the point it can 'profoundly unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions', calling into question the situations in which we are involved. Initially, my ideas were not well formed, and were often fragments of thoughts that took on new meanings when working with the PhD research group. I found that it could be anxiety provoking to share partly formed ideas, and in the early days of working in the group, I often presented each narrative as an experience that had a beginning, a middle and a rather tidy end, giving my narrative a sense of completion. This anxiety could also reflect my desire to project more confidence, as well as wariness about how my ideas might be interpreted by others. Baumard (1999) makes the point that we should not fall into the trap of thinking that just because something is shared it cannot be challenged; this suggests that individuals have a tendency to invent plausible rationales for behaviour. The problem with 'shaping' knowledge in this way is that it loses the context and 'jagged character' of practice (Schatzki et al., 2005), and this was something I was critiquing in the literature. I recognised something about experiential accounts that resonated with me, in that they tell a story with inherent confusion and ambiguity as part of the narrative. I found that when reflection is brought back to the self, new meaning can emerge, influencing evolving practice. In this way, conscious reflexivity sets up questioning which defines and redefines the self and the narratives

that we write (Gabriel, 2015), creating the potential to move and change the thinking of readers and listeners.

A research group can be understood as a fractal of a wider research community (Mowles, 2017b). Despite the uncertainty I felt, I was energised by the way the sessions worked, and I learned a great deal from hearing others speaking in the group and sharing what was going on for them in their lives, work and research. It is a privilege to be included in a conversation to which others bring their own confusions and challenges, and to explore them openly. This conversational approach opened up new avenues that challenged how I was thinking, but at the same time gave me confidence in working with others to explore my own confusions. I had never worked in this way before, and this space to talk with others was something that became important to me. Sharing my thinking narratively gave me the chance to explore ideas more deeply, and reflects the value of working iteratively in a group situation. I felt listened to and respected, and exploring these ideas brought new perspectives and insights that were often unexpected and challenging.

In 2010, I experienced a critical change in my working situation, and this brought with it the opportunity for further reflection on my research. I became aware of political discussions taking place around the value of business support and frequent discussions in the media about the justification of government funding (Richard, 2008). I found this troubling and suspected that future funding for Business Link could be withdrawn and that the adviser role might not continue. These concerns were realised with the closure of Business Link in 2011. However, by the end of 2010 and prior to the closure I had been able to move to a full-time role at UH, seeing this as a more secure working arrangement. This caused me a lot of consternation as, once I had moved over to UH full time, I was no longer visiting clients and the regular source of new advising experiences for my research was curtailed. I had some concerns about how I would be able to continue to write about advising in these changed circumstances. By this time, I had written up a number of narratives, so at the time my focus remained on these as the source of narrative 'data' for research into business advising.

Journaling as a form of narrative data

It took quite some time before I reflected on the journals I kept when I ran CasanCo, and even longer before I felt able to share what I had written with others. I had started journaling as part of an OU course taken in 1997, and somehow the process had stuck. I continued to write regularly about things that were of interest or that struck me long before I had decided to take up the PhD. Riessman (2008) encourages students to keep a diary or log, suggesting that such writing can jog the memory and foster critical awareness of the decisions that are made in

research. The journals that I had kept were written prior to the start of my PhD, and as they were not set up as research diaries or logs, I felt that they were not necessarily a useful source to include in my writing. I had not considered at the time of writing that my journals might offer further opportunities to make sense of experience. As I am arguing that knowledge emerges in the history of social interaction, it makes sense to me now that these journals bring past experience into my present thinking. However, it took me some time to make this connection.

Having been introduced to journaling in my OU studies, my writing chronicled the years from 2000 to 2006 during which time I was working with Jonathan and struggling to sustain the business activities of CasanCo. Reading my journals again after many years, I found things that surprised and sometimes shocked me. I became particularly aware of how important systems thinking was to me at the time, and how I talked of systems-based approaches with an enthusiastic zeal and an uncritical voice that I now find uncomfortable reading. The writing also reminded me of a history of trying things that did not always work, and meant I now had evidence that might otherwise have been lost to me. Recognising the flux of the problems we were experiencing at that time I can now situate this as an activity I was undertaking at the time to try to make sense of complexity:

In July 2002,[3] I wrote an outline of the problems as I saw them at the time:

- *Cash flow has all but dried up*
- *This is caused by very low sales*
- *This is partly caused by lack of sales and marketing process and structure and also by downturn in exports*
- *Part of the problem is high overheads and we need to get these down*
- *I have an immediate problem linking to RB and NW [banks] which is a nightmare*

So where am I? Well, in need of options that maximise our potential and minimise the losses to all concerned.

As I read these thoughts, I could see that many of the challenges I was facing as a business owner were similar to those of my clients. This bringing of the past into the present resonates with how I was coming to understand my advising practice as a reflexive process. I realised that reflecting on experience in all its forms and sharing my thinking narratively with others was, in fact, my research method.

[3] 04/07/2002 Light purple book

Once I had mentioned in the group that I had kept journals it was suggested that I look at them again; however, this made me defensive, and for a long time I avoided going back to them. I did not share my feelings of vulnerability in talking about the business closure with the group, and I felt under pressure to share things that I was sensitive about. An outcome of reflexive research is an understanding of the way it can change one's perspective on the past in the light of subsequent experience. As I reflected on the business's failure, I became conscious that I could not be held accountable for everything that had happened in the way that I had previously believed. It is clear this was not how I felt at the time. In the journal, I wrote:

> *I am really mad – really mad with myself for not being able to do anything at the moment to shore up the problem. My systems approach is grinding to a halt – not because it won't work but because I cannot see clearly yet. What can I do? Speak to others, keep talking to Jonathan! Keep talking to everyone and devise a plan*[4].

Reading this called out thoughts into the present, helping me to recognise that reflection changes how you see the past, and that meaning arises in a complex history that comes together at a particular time and place (Loewen Walker, 2014, Shaw, 2002). This is how I understand the living present. Being encouraged to read the journals was a way of reminding me that nothing that happens is random, but neither is it predictable. In reading about devising 'a plan' I recognise how I was trying to make sense of what was happening in the present based on more traditional ideas, but with no way of predicting what was to come. Finding a way to grasp this evolving 'me' and bring it into the research has not been easy, and a metaphor I have used to describe writing about this reflection is 'sand slipping through my fingers'. It can be difficult to find language that represents something of the slipperiness of the perpetual construction of meaning and knowledge that I experience in this temporal understanding of experience.

As I write now, I know that exploring the journals was the beginning of a personal understanding of the concept of taking the self as the object of research, and my awareness of how this informs and changes how we are in the world. In conversation with Peter (Chapter 2), I was curious to discover what he had done to sustain the business over time, perhaps because of what I had not been able to do at CasanCo. Perhaps I was asking a very different type of question to those posed by the other advisers, such as Colin with his corporate background, who had gone before. I will never know if it was my keenness to find out more from Peter about the success of his business that led to him opening up to me in a way that he had not with other advisers. I had not previously considered this as a possibility. Paying attention to experience as

[4] 04/07/2002 Light purple book

a means of deepening learning is important (Higgins, 2017a), and is critical to the asking of questions that challenge and open up new ways of thinking, and which sustain reflective conversation. It is also crucial to continue to recognise how this questioning pushes the researcher to examine aspects of the self that may have remained unchallenged (Ravitch and Riggan, 2016).

The journals told a story that I had not considered previously, and which often contrasted with what I thought had happened; facts had been smoothed out or adapted as I had talked about them over the years. Attard (2012) talks of journal writing as a catalyst for his reflective thought in developing his professional practice. He suggests that for him:

> it is painful in the sense that I sometimes feel guilty that I didn't learn about something before. It is also hard because what I learn can easily point out some failures of the past ... especially about things I used to think [that] were the right way of doing things (Attard, 2012:164).

Like him, I sometimes found reading my journals long after they had been written painful. However, in thinking about this as a reflective process the way in which knowledge and meaning evolves in a movement of thought over time is suggested.

I have discussed my discomfort with the traditional models of advising and consulting (Chapter 2); that is, with the view of adviser activity most often talked of as a linear process of 'giving advice' with the client as recipient. A conversation comes to mind in which I was asked about my research by a colleague at UH, and I mentioned it was about 'business advising and my work with small firms'. Her immediate response was that *'Hmm…it must be difficult telling people what to do'*. This comment led me to reflect that when I say I am 'advising', I am often trying *not* to tell people what to do! This feels to me a very different approach to the one I experienced with Jonathan as my adviser at CasanCo: I felt that he was keener to impose his ideas on my situation than to listen and work together. Reading my journals is a reminder of why I had experienced such a strong reaction to my colleague's comment. Over time, I had become wary of advising practice that could be interpreted as a prescription for action, and I recognise why I have come to think about advising differently. Without the journals, this thinking process may have been left unexamined. By reflecting on my practice I do not encounter the challenge that Nikolova et al. (2009) talk of in relation to gaining access to and exploring the experience of the client–adviser relationship. There is a dearth of literature reflecting the complexity and emotional context that entrepreneurial small-business owners and managers experience (Higgins et al., 2013b). The challenges of access go some way towards explaining the lack of practice-based research by those exploring the practice of others. In

taking up this research into personal practice, access is not an issue for me, but there are other considerations. One of these is that the taking of an individual perspective indicates constraints on any generalised conclusions that can be made. There are limitations to reflexivity and the extent to which we can be aware of how meaning might evolve from the process of conducting research and reflecting on it in the years that follow (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

Understanding the self as social through and through

Etherington (2004:71) talks of her reflexive approach to research as being about finding ways of working that fit with 'who I am'. In feedback on my writing, I was continually challenged by the question of where 'I' was in the narrative. This reminded me that working reflexively in this way requires the ability to situate the self in a broader context with others, exploring connections to the complexity of the situations being researched. It also pays attention to the emotions that influence the way we see ourselves and others in our social contexts (Burkitt, 2012). I began to doubt my approach: what was it that I could say about advising when the research was based solely on my own practice? Pollner (1991:370) identifies the value of radical reflexivity, which he calls 'unsettling', as we heighten our insecurities while reflecting on the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality. It was through narrative in its various forms, arising from discussion with others, writing and re-reading my journals, attending conferences and sharing my experiences and writings with others, as well as in private conversation, that my sense of self was evolving. I did not initially talk of this as a reflexive activity, but it influenced my practice and research in the broader understanding of the concept of self and other.

In taking up themes of reflexivity in the research, researcher reflexivity is increasingly seen as central to qualitative research (Doyle, 2013). However, there continues to be a lack of diversity in social research, which, if addressed, could increase the use of reflexive approaches through the 'questioning of what really makes sense, of how we live and experience, our own and others' voices and conversations' (Higgins, 2017b:2). There can be some confusion over the use of the terms 'reflection' and 'reflexivity' and they are often used interchangeably. There is a general view that these terms suggest a sense of 'turning back' onto the self, with Bolton (2010:10) relating this to reflection, with a sense of fixing one's thoughts on some subject. This suggests that reflection is a simple exercise rather than one that constitutes deeper meaning. May and Perry (2014:109) take a different view of turning back, relating it to reflexivity, which involves 'turning back on oneself in order that knowledge production becomes the subject of investigation'(May and Perry, 2014:109). This 'reflexive turn' enables the partial, provisional and perspectival claims of knowledge to influence the research conversation (Mauthner and

Doucet, 2003). Finlay (2002b) suggests that these terms can be seen as a continuum, with reflection being 'thinking about' and 'reflexivity' suggesting a more dynamic interpretive process involving the self, and thinking about how the self is thinking. This suggests that there is not one way of taking up reflection in research, or of understanding the processes that might lead the researcher to become more reflexive. This makes it difficult to be explicit about the research methods undertaken here which have evolved over the course of the study.

Mowles (2015) offers a further definition of the process in terms of detaching the self from one's involvement as a second-order reflective process. This suggests the idea of the ability to think deeply about experience. In bringing the reflection back to the self, a third-order process evolves, in which reflection is brought back to the self in order to learn, and with the possibility of being changed by it. This understanding of situating meaning and knowledge arising from ongoing interaction with others has implications for the research methods I have chosen for this study. In taking a reflexive stance, taken-for-granted ways of thinking that are invisible to us become available in conversation, allowing difference to be explored. This methodology leaves the researcher open to continuous learning through paying attention and thinking about what happens in conversation. I am arguing that there is no separation between the researcher and the researched, and it follows that meaning arises as we reflect on experience.

Implications for reflexivity in the broader context of research

In setting out this research methodology and the methods used, I have talked of my experience of the CMC PhD research group and the sharing of ideas at conferences as if these are bounded opportunities for reflecting on experience and making sense of practice. In the midst of participative communication, questions emerge, and reflecting on these provide the vivid moments of experience (Shaw, 2011) from which new threads of conversation and meaning arise. One of these vivid moments, which illuminates a particular aspect of practice that I do not find reflected in the mainstream understanding of advising, has stayed in my mind. I have attended the CMC conference on a number of occasions and there have been times when, in group discussion, something has been said that has stuck in my mind. On this occasion, we were sitting in a large circle of perhaps fifty delegates. In such situations, the flow of conversation is self-organising, as individuals respond to the topic under discussion, sharing their ideas in ways that are then taken up by others. A participant reflected openly in the group on how he had been paying attention to the silent conversation that was going on for him, and how the things he was preparing to contribute to the spontaneous conversation were shifting and changing as the discussion moved on. His point resonated with me, calling out a heightened awareness of the ongoing silent conversation and private role play that arises simultaneously

with conversation with others (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). This is a theme that I discuss in later chapters, as my awareness increased of how 'the voice of self and other arises in webs of complex, fluid, dialogical social relations' (Burkitt, 2016:335). The work of Mead (1934) and Siegel (2016) explores this as a way of understanding how consciousness and meaning arise, introducing the concept of mind as a relational process.

Situating this view of social interaction in a wider body of knowledge that talks of reflexivity is one of many ways to talk of self and other. In my second progression, towards the final stages of the PhD, I was asked by one of my examiners about the difference between what I was suggesting and Giddens' view of the relationship between structure and agency. I had not considered this at the time but I have since explored how Giddens (1991) talks of reflexivity and how I am taking up the process here. There is not space in this thesis to undertake a full review of the similarities and differences between the approaches; however, for Giddens, reflexivity is an important theme in his work that maintains a duality of structure and agency. This is different to paradoxical tension, where meaning is arising in a continuous conversation of gestures (Mead 1934). Burkitt (2016:323) argues that Giddens preserves a notion of agency as an 'individual possession'. This takes a perspective in which individuals engage with a wider environment and themselves, as a mediated process from which they will then act (Schatzki et al., 2005). Both Mead and Elias take an alternative view of social patterns emerging from self-organising interactions in ongoing local activity (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). From this perspective, it is argued that there is no direct cause and effect in social interaction. Situations and events arise from many local interactions. As was the case with the reflection of the conference attendee speaking into the group above, we are always enabled and constrained simultaneously by the shifting structures in which we are taking action.

In Mead's understanding, as taken up in this research, rather than the sending and receiving of messages occurring as in the engineering view of communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1949), social interaction is characterised as a complex transaction Mead called the 'social act' (Simpson, 2009). It is in the conversation of gestures, where one person's gesture calls out a response, which then calls out further gestures and responses, that social meaning is constructed, reinforced and disrupted. My understanding of advising and researching is simultaneously forming and being formed by similarities and differences that I explore as a sense of self and other. I understand that when interacting with others 'I' am influenced by the socialised 'me', in the private conversation and role play that arises, but I am also responding to the spontaneity of what comes up for others. Mead suggests that this is how individuals interact with a 'generalised other' at the same time as interacting locally. Sometimes these private thoughts and feelings are shared, but not always. This is what Mead (1934) called the

'I-me' dialectic, as an interpretation of Hegel's dialectic approach (Hegel et al., 1977). I recognise this as a reflexive experience that is inherent in all human relating.

Understanding social interaction as ongoing complex responsive processes of relating, the individual and the social are constituted simultaneously. This is a relational view of being in the world (ontology) (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003, Schatzki et al., 2005) which has implications for the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and possibilities for transformation of the world to which we belong (May and Perry, 2013). Elkjaer (2009:78) takes these ideas forward stating that:

> action and thinking are not separate and clearly defined processes, but are integrated and connected. This integration of knowing and acting is mirrored in concrete action, both bodily and verbal'.

As key development processes of mind, Siegel (2008) introduces exploration of the term 'integration' in neurobiology in his discussion connecting the sense of self to the idea of self-with-other. Therefore, by understanding that knowledge emerges in a history of social interaction, I recognise that epistemology, ontology and research practice are inseparable (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003, Stacey and Griffin, 2005). A limitation compared to more evaluative approaches could be that the general principle of moving towards something that can be described as a truth no longer holds, as the research is regarded as a process of perpetual construction, in which the outcomes are fluid and transformative.

When applied to research, the dialectic movement of thought can be understood as abduction, that is, containing aspects of inductive/deductive research approaches but not simply a mix of the two (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). Thomas (2010:557) draws on the work of the American pragmatist, Peirce, in suggesting that abduction goes beyond the confines of research practice, and that in our everyday relations it is 'the garnering and organising of information to analyse and deal with our social worlds'. An abductive process infers a best explanation at a particular time, but also recognises the fallibility of any particular conclusion. In abduction, rather than the present being a bridge between past and future, both past and future are experienced in the actions of the present (Simpson, 2009). The understanding of the present from Mead's (1934) perspective is not an individualistic one, but rather one that will include the context of the local situation, and our understanding of broader social influences. This is best understood within the pragmatist notion of 'inquiry' (Dewey, 1938). In this approach the aim of abduction is to arrive at an understanding based on an openness to developing an interpretation based on present understanding (Martela, 2015), rather than an understanding that can be seen as universal. This is particularly important when researching the complexity

of social contexts, as they typically have less tendency for repetition, are not open to direct observation and have greater variability. It is also difficult to isolate phenomena within them (Levin-Rozalis, 2000).

This view resonates with what Shaw (2002:46), in her understanding of working with clients and her research practice, calls 'learning our way forward'. In this process, our history will be present in how we interact, along with anticipations of future intentions. These are not, however, fixed in a Kantian process of deliberating, choosing, intending and acting to enable the selection of particular actions in advance (Suhler and Churchland, 2009). What Shaw is suggesting is that learning is a reflexive process, wherein there is increasing self-awareness arising as we interact (Williams, 2005:68). In this relational process there will always be the possibility of novelty and surprise as we make sense of what is coming up for us in the moment (Wiggins and Hunter, 2016). This is reflected in how, over time, the beginnings and endings of my narratives have become blurred, with their meanings shifting through reflective sense-making.

This view of research challenged the boundary that I had put on the research topic of 'exploring Business Link advising'. I could no longer hold on to a position that glossed over the experience that had significantly influenced my work. It was not only through the journals that I was aware of these influences; I could see this shift in other ways. I had begun submitting papers to Institute of Small Business and Entrepreneurship conferences; the titles of these papers reveal how my understanding of organisational complexity has evolved. In 2005, I was talking about 'Integrating new business practices into SMEs: identifying and overcoming barriers', but by 2016 I was stressing the importance of reflexivity in 'Thinking about thinking: reflexivity as evolving practice for personal and business development'. These titles reflect how I was challenging my own ideology, and shifting from an assumption of organisations as systems to an understanding that advising arises in communicative interaction.

I now see that these titles reflect my ongoing attempts to say something about the experience of advising in an open forum. They also reveal the shift in my views away from linear and systems-based ideas and towards those of a more processual nature. Until 2013, I submitted regularly to the Business Policy track, aiming to get my practice perspective considered in a track that was mostly reporting on the economic evaluation of business policy and support. I really wanted my voice, as an adviser, to be heard. I was quite despondent about the other papers in the track, which on the whole tended to overlook the situated and emotional perspective that I was experiencing in my work. I only considered joining another track when one with a practitioner learning focus was introduced in 2014, reflecting my recognition that I

was now researching my own practice, rather than business advising as a whole, and so looking for alternative communities of researchers.

Ongoing sense-making in the ordinary flow of day-to-day conversation

Shaw (2002:171) suggests that by asking 'how do we participate in the way things change over time?' we gain further understanding of 'how at the very moment of our joint sense-making experience, are we changing ourselves and our situation?' This has implications for methodology that reflect what Elias (1956) sets out as the paradox of involved detachment. In this view, as reflexive human beings we can never be fully detached nor fully involved in any situation, and our sense of self is perpetually transforming. I cannot step away from my experience, and it is from this perspective that I have come to understand my work of advising as being a process of learning through ongoing sense-making. I can appreciate this from different perspectives. In taking up a practice-based view of learning, work practices can be understood as being 'created and organised through the achievement of temporary working consensus, mutual orientation and meditational artefacts' (Higgins et al., 2013a:477). For example, my role as adviser required me to undertake formal action planning and the writing up of notes Business Link systems. I could argue that the way I categorised and documented the flow of conversation in this reporting activity was part of the sense-making process, but it also fulfilled an expectation of the role as one in which action plans became artefacts to provide evidence of activity. However, while these artefacts served a purpose in structuring conversation, they were not an accurate representation of the complexity of what was going on in my interactions with clients as we were finding ways to go on together in the advising relationship.

From a social perspective, sense-making is a dynamic process in which we are never fully immersed in what is going on, but yet cannot step outside that experience (Elias, 1956). In Elias' view, sense-making takes place in local interaction, as a bodily experience that is caught up with emotions and power relating as we respond to others. This view of involvement and detachment differs from mainstream theories that suggest a more concrete or staged process of learning. Sense-making in this way cannot be explained by approaches that are traditionally applied to learning and which separate out stages of thinking and acting, for example Kolb's (1984) learning cycle. Also, while the sense-making theory of Weick et al. (2005) reflects this process as arising from the confusion and flux of everyday experience, the way it is explained is as being the taking of a retrospective view in which the sense-maker is 'labelling and categorising to stabilise the streaming of experience' (Weick et al., 2005:411). In this way, the process remains detached from immediate experience. There were often requirements to write

up work with clients for formal purposes, but I find it difficult to reconcile the sense I was making in my situated advising practice with the post-rationalising process that was written up after the event.

What I am taking forward from these ideas is that the research approach for this study takes a social perspective informed by complexity theories and uses it to explore meaning arising in the midst of our interaction with others. A narrative approach enables reflection on the everyday flow of life, where, in the plodding along, hoping, helping and encouraging, something happens that 'sticks' (Miller, 2005). These moments weave their way into narratives, and so, in making sense of practice in this way, reflexivity that can lead to change is encouraged. This means that there will always be a sense of incompleteness when drawing conclusions (Craig, 2009). It is in these ongoing complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2001) that the relationship between the individual and the social can be understood as paradoxical. Based on these ideas, I argue that in this exploration of advising practice my personal challenges cannot be studied without recognising the historical, institutional, policy and cultural influences that are inherent in my everyday advising activity. This challenges research that views micro and macro levels of analysis as separate but intertwined (Chak, 2006). I cannot separate out my local responses from the broader social patterns that are shaping and being shaped by what the client and I are doing together when I say that I am advising.

What does it mean to work with a narrative process that is radically reflexive?[5]

This research is self-reflective, and in it, as a researcher, I am simultaneously reflecting on my practice as an adviser and as a researcher. To this end, in this chapter I have set out a rationale for taking a narrative approach that resonates with a body of literature discussing working with and writing about narrative (for example, Attard, 2012, Etherington, 2004, Cunliffe et al., 2004, Polkinghorne, 1988, Riessman, 2008). Taking up a narrative approach that evolves iteratively has some similarities with the idea of 'radically reflexive' research (Cunliffe, 2003, Orr and Bennett, 2009). Orr and Bennett (2009:90) provide a rationale for radically reflexive research which suggests that 'harnessing the insights of reflexivity, our reflections enable us to become more attuned to the dynamics of our research practices'. This resonates with my desire to remain open to the messy, exploratory, co-created process that I have experienced in

[5] The following three sections have been included at the request of my PhD examiners to clarify further the reflexive approach used in this research. In arguing that experience and narrative evolves, I am aware that the viva process has served as a further example of what I am talking about in this thesis. Writing these sections has given me an opportunity to engage in a further iteration following a conversational process, this time with my examiners, and to reflect further on what this approach means in practice, and how the reflexive approach taken here can be understood as a process of thinking about thinking.

undertaking research and in advising practice with small business owners and managers. Cunliffe (2011:664) argues that being radically reflexive is 'an embodied and intersubjective knowing, that may be understood through radically reflexive practice'. I have some reservations about this view, and challenge the idea of research being 'embodied', rather than being understood as knowledge arising in radically social processes that remain inherently complex, responsive and relational.

In taking an approach informed by complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2001b, Stacey, 2001a), researcher and researched cannot be separated dualistically. From this radically social perspective, reflexivity is a process of ongoing critical reflection on experience from which new meaning and understanding emerges. This resonates with Bourdieu's definition of reflexivity as the objectivation of the subject (Gingras, 2010, Bourdieu, 2007). He developed this approach from his refusal to follow a 'principle of loftiness' (Bourdieu, 2007:41) that he considered was distancing research from its social context. In Mead's terms, being able to take up the attitudes of other people in our own thinking is a human ability, and because we are capable of seeing ourselves as others see us we are able to take ourselves as objects to ourselves (Mowles, 2015). This idea, which Mead relates to the development of a 'me', reflects how we take up the attitudes of others as we interact. However, according to Mead (1934), this 'me' is inconceivable without a spontaneous performative 'I', and Simpson (2014:280) goes on to suggest that 'the "I" cannot be objectively perceived until the consequences have become reflexively incorporated into the "me"'. This means the experience of researching reflexively goes beyond an epistemic understanding of reflection (Gingras, 2010), by recognising broader social patterns from which individual understandings and knowledge emerge. Following these ideas, I argue that aspects of practice are influencing and being influenced by each other simultaneously. In this way, reflexivity can be understood as an iterative process of thinking about thinking.

What constitutes the raw data for reflection when bringing the self into research?

In this research method, experience is written up as narratives representing a particular understanding of situation arising at a particular time. Undertaking writing as an iterative process is a way of sustaining an ongoing learning process, despite the limitations of textual linearity. In setting out the method here, I believe that further explanation is required as to what constitutes the 'raw material' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005:24) from which narrative meaning emerges. I am arguing that 'material' in self-reflective work is co-constructed locally through ongoing conversational processes that are both private and with others. This is different from

how some other researchers talk of narrative approaches, in which conversation can be captured as a fixed form of 'data' to be analysed (Etherington, 2004, Hunter, 2010).

Paying attention to ongoing experience as the material for narratives enables the self to become present in the research, and with each iteration new meanings are explored in the light of further experience. One unexpected source of material for my reflection came from the re-reading of the private journals that I had written many years before. Reading these in the present gave me opportunities for further reflection and alternative understandings. As I re-read my words and reflected on my experiences, many emotions were called out that would probably have been lost if I had not written (and then later re-read) these journals. This brings to the fore the concept of temporality, as these journals gave me insight into my interpretations of situations experienced prior to my research on advising. They served as artefacts encouraging reflection on how my understanding of situations such as the closure of CasanCo and working with Jonathan, my Business Link adviser, had evolved over time and influenced my practice. In this way, the journal entries remained unchanged; however, I was able to reflect on them to bring my thinking from a previous time into the present, introducing them into the iterative process and changing my understanding of the past.

A limitation of this approach is that the process of writing is inherently linear and in tension with the fluid nature of knowledge arising in a continuous process of becoming. Drawing on complexity theories, I have suggested that the nature of reality arises in perpetual construction as individuals interact. I believe this is what Shaw (2002:46) is alluding to when she suggests that:

> This social process of learning our way forward is paradoxical because the past (our personally experienced histories of social relating) helps us to recognize the future and give it meaning, yet the future is also changing the meaning of the very past with which we can recognize the future.

I would add to Shaw's view here that it also helps to recognise the past in the present. However, in paying attention to experience, a question might be asked about more precisely what might be 'reflected on' in order to make sense of experience and to add depth to understanding. In developing my thesis, I was often aware that a particular experience had struck me in a particular way. Writing these situations in narrative form enabled opportunities for imposing some order on thinking that was initially fluid and emergent. In working with the PhD group, in which others would engage and reflect on my work, the way that others responded to the narrative often brought up surprising, emotional and nuanced understandings that I had not

previously considered. There were many situations in which when others challenged my understanding of a narrative that understanding became obfuscated. This led to the re-writing of narratives, reflecting how disruptions and challenges could lead to the emergence of new meanings. Fleck (2012) argues that what is considered correct in one context requires acceptance collectively. While I am not arguing that working in the PhD group was aimed at achieving any sense of a collective acceptance, I am mindful of Fleck's (2012:157) view of 'facts' arising through 'a tentative signal of resistance by the collective'. The idea of learning from a sense of resistance or challenge resonates with my experience of working with the group (and with clients) in a reflective way. Similarly, Fleck (2012) considers all theory to be culturally conditioned. However, while these ideas of group processes have some resonance with Fleck's (2012) idea of the collective sustaining a particular thought-style in a particular time and place, I would argue that all thinking has a continually evolving history that does not lead to a fixed body of knowledge that can lay outside our social experience.

In engaging with my writing in my private journals, I wrote about my experience of working with Jonathan. I was encouraged by my supervisors and others in the group to think about how this relationship had influenced my practice as an adviser. I have written (Appendix 2) about how I read in my journals that in the final stages of closing down the company, Jonathan was unable to offer me any support in that situation. In the iterative process, my understanding of the relationship with Jonathan shifted in ways that would not have been possible without the influence of the words written by my younger self. I had written of how he came in, saw what was going on, and then walked away. The language was stark, and although this had happened many years before, it called out feelings in the present of a sense of being alone, frustrated and of blaming myself, not only for what had happened but also harbouring blame related to Jonathan's lack of support at this difficult time. I am aware that this is where the narrative might have ended, with the idea of advising as ineffectual remaining unexamined. However, as I wrote about Jonathan in what were often pejorative terms, I came to think differently about how he had worked with me.

I began to recognise my own discomfort when reflecting on my experience of being a Business Link adviser, and how, along with colleagues, we were working with enabling constraints of policy-based support. As I began talking and writing about the targets, objectives and initiatives that I was working with, these became the narratives included in Chapter 7, in which I talk of IDB, GVA and other policy-based influences. As an adviser, I had become aware of the income-generation targets that Jonathan had been working with, and I realised that the monthly meetings between us fell under another of these initiatives aimed at generating income.

Jonathan had not been able to bring about the change to the business. This reminds me of the challenges of the traditional concept of advising, where there is an assumption of an 'expert' outsider who can transfer of knowledge to the client. This overlooks the complexity of the day-to-day lived experience that is overlooked in these abstract models. This mode of thinking, which supports a cause and effect linearity, does not take into account the perpetual construction of experience as we interact with others.

In remaining open to the surprise of new meanings that exploring practice with others can bring, I recognised that in closing down the company (a decision I made without consulting him) Jonathan could no longer sustain his regular income stream. As I talked of how shame and blame were particular emotions called out for me when thinking of the closure of the company it changed how I felt about the experience. I could begin to imagine that this must have been seen as a significant failure for Jonathan in his role as an adviser, and I experienced empathy rather than blame. This is different to how Attia and Edge (2017) talk of the need to find a sense of wholeness as a researcher, suggesting that reflexivity can bring the possibility of reaching congruence between who we are and how others understand us. In paying attention to the broader context of advising, rather than remaining as a reflection on the relationship between Jonathan and myself, my thinking about how I understood the advising role changed. This is how I have come to understand the nature of reflexive narrative. In the reflective process there is an opportunity to think about how I am now thinking differently – thinking about thinking – and this leads to deeper understanding of personal practice and patterns of advising practice more broadly.

A theme of the research is the tension between a social complexity perspective and a systems-based view of advising that I came to challenge. In Chapter 2, I have suggested that my interest in 'systems thinking' evolved as a response to the complex and challenging reality of making sense of what had happened at CasanCo. Another aspect of reading my journal was facing up to my attempts to work with systems thinking and how, over time, I experienced the limitations of using abstracted problem-solving approaches to implement new ways of working. This enabled me to make further connections with the way that Jonathan and later on another adviser, Colin, worked with me, and how I found their corporate and systems-based experience challenging. Taking a radically social reflexive approach has enabled me to critique these approaches and drawing on a complex responsive processes perspective is for me a more congruent explanation of practice.

Making sense of the method

In bringing these ideas together as a method that encompasses iterative and reflexive narrative exploration, I cannot overlook that there are limitations in this form of research. One such is a possible view that this research is *my* interpretation of *my* practice. Gingras (2010:623) relates that some researchers have seen reflexivity 'as a hindrance' that can lead to particular difficulties which have a paralysing effect on their research. He argues that Bourdieu developed a conception of reflexivity that offered more complex ways of talking about practice, in particular through 'the gaze of others' (Bourdieu, 2007:89). Through my approach I recognise that in working with the group and the experience of working with clients provides a broader experience from which I can draw conclusions. It is encouraging to find when talking about personal practice that this has the potential to be taken up meaningfully by others, encouraging them to reflect on their experience. An example of this was in sharing my narrative on experience of working with government targets related to business advising with a group of head teachers. There was an immediate ripple of recognition among my audience, and as I finished they spoke of similar challenges they were facing in their experience of league tables and other educational initiatives. This led to a lively discussion.

By taking this approach, I suggest that the relational nature of advising and research is represented, in which emergent outcomes can go beyond reflection about practice and thus bring about emotionally deeper understanding. This has led to recognising that in taking a radically social perspective I have experienced a shift away from stuck patterns of thinking and acting that were sustained by the linearity of a time line of past, present and future that is sustained within more traditional dualistic and systems-based approaches. When talking about Trevor and his business challenges in Chapter 8, I write of the shift in his understanding of his situation and his comment to me that 'y*ou are like a business psychiatrist*!' In reflecting on my practice as an adviser there has been a similar therapeutic effect, helping me to understand experience as complex and interconnected; through this process I have to take responsibility for myself, and at the same time, by recognising this interconnectedness, I cannot isolate my own thinking as if acting alone.

Ethical considerations in researching practice

In stating that I am researching my practice, and in reflecting on my work with others, there is a need to clarify what ethical implications there might be. The nature of this research is that the narratives will reflect relationships and will involve discussion about others. Dewey (1905) makes the point that to elucidate meaning from the particular there are moral and ethical implications of which we need to be aware. He suggests that 'significance is never just

predetermined'; it is always 'hanging upon the operation of the psychical, of the peculiarly individual' (Dewey, 1905:327). I interpret this as meaning that it is in our local interaction, rather than from general principles, that we can understand ethics. A generalised view of ethics does not recognise how ethical considerations arise in our relations with others (Griffin and Stacey, 2005:29).

In exploring advising practice, I can never determine in advance what particular experience will strike me as having some importance or value leading to the writing of a narrative. This means that there can be no blanket agreement to use in a particular situation or event that I may have been involved with, as each situation is unique. However, in working with clients I have always discussed the fact that I am conducting research into my practice, and that I may include the situations that we discuss in that research. This has meant that as I have been working I have suggested to clients that some aspects of our conversations may be included in the writing. However, what is actually written becomes materially important in considering ethical issues. There is a difference between asking someone '*are you OK with using this conversation as part of my research?*' and someone finding something unexpectedly revealing on the printed page. Ronald Pelias mentions an illustration of this in relation to a narrative account he published about his father's illness (Ellis et al., 2008). This is a reminder that reflection can have an emotional impact on the person being reflected upon (Finlay, 2008). This has ethical implications for personal practice as discussed here, but also for how I understand working reflectively with clients.

This has led to awareness of how I might represent individuals in my writing. Saunders et al. (2015) discuss this as the difference between keeping information hidden from all but the researcher, and keeping identities secret. They also point out that in some situations it may mean choosing not to share parts of the data. In aiming for confidentiality in this research, where possible I have changed names and other details, such as industry contexts, to reduce the chances of a specific situation being linked to a specific individual. However, using someone's actual name in writing sustains the connection to the individual and the context in the living present of the research. This is why in the first draft I deliberately kept the original names and contexts, to maintain my closeness to the research contexts that I am writing about. Changing names to codes, such as Client 1 and Client 2, can remove much of the emotional context of the situation in the early stages of writing. Therefore, choosing to change a name from the original to a fictitious one (as I have done throughout the work in the final stages) enables the anonymity to be upheld in the final work. However, as Squire (2008) mentions, anonymising data can give increased confidentiality at the expense of the richness of data. To minimise this I did not change names until the first full draft.

As a Business Link adviser, another ethical consideration is that I worked for Exemplas, which has since become a subsidiary of the University of Hertfordshire. Miller (2008), working in a highly sensitive environment herself, suggests that in researching workplaces what she terms 'face management' is also present. This reflects what Mead and Elias talk of in relation to how we act in response to how others may see us. This is another dimension of research that becomes available in taking a reflexive approach, and which will affect how I write about experience in a way that maintains the stringent ethical requirements of UH.

Generalisability of conclusions from social research

Throughout this chapter, I have explained how I am paying attention to my practice to draw conclusions on business advising. This situates the conclusions made as resonating with ideas of practical judgement, or *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2005), rather than in a process that strives for the scientific knowledge understood as *episteme* (Mowles, 2011). This situation suggests a limitation of the type of knowledge that can be produced, and this is important to recognise in social contexts. Taking a personal view of social processes places limits on the breadth of any claims made. Flyvbjerg (2004) suggests that practical judgement of this nature cannot be brought into a theoretical formula. This suggests another potential limitation in terms of policy, which is traditionally driven by the statistical trends and value curves of economic discourse. This is particularly resonant with me, as the diversity of advisers and clients is overlooked in the generalised support that is often offered for business growth and improvement in government-funded business advice programmes. I can understand how turning social activity into a numerical form means that it can be used comparatively to assess how one adviser or one Business Link branch is performing compared to others; I still have a computer mouse mat given to all advisers in 2005/6 which was intended to remind us all of our annual targets! It is frustrating, however, that this measurement represents a form of power in itself, and the subsequent analysis of data can reflect little of the messy and unpredictable activity of the ways individuals work to achieve the numbers produced. So what can be learned from making personal thoughts and ideas available to others through narratives? Despite the ethical and confidentiality challenges present in taking up a narrative approach in this research, I suggest that it can bring understanding and meaning to the social dimensions of practice that other approaches tend to overlook.

There is often a call for 'rigour' in qualitative research, and several themes are highlighted by Koch and Harrington (1998) that are worth considering here. Firstly, they argue that there needs to be an internal logic to the work that gives detail of the reflective approach of the researcher. As Koch and Harrington (1998) highlight, this is another consideration in research. In situating

research into the broader literature, drawing on narrative approaches enables the context of the researcher to become part of the research conversation (Ravitch and Riggan, 2016). In exploring methodology and method, Higgins et al. (2015) argue that for the reader to have confidence in what is reported an account is required of how the researcher has acquired and developed their knowledge. In drawing on reflexive narrative enquiry, I am exploring themes that go beyond the immediate stories that are being related. There is no separate literature review in this study, and, similarly to Lundquist Coey (2016), I argue that in paying attention to experience, subjects and themes emerge in the research process in the form that she terms 'animated questions'. Therefore, there literature will be explored in each chapter as themes evolve.

Reflexive approaches can be fraught with ambiguity, but they can also offer rich insights into interpersonal dynamics and can open up the consciousness of the researcher and those engaging with the research (Finlay, 2002b). Craig (2009) suggests that from some research perspectives writing about relationships brings a form of contamination into the research, or that criticism of the researcher themselves is brought into the study. She counters this by suggesting that the paying of attention to relationships allows insights into the research from the transparency of subjectivity and participation within the research itself. As Hendry (2007:494) suggests, narrative research is about a level of faith through which we can trust in the stories and the storyteller. This view is supported by Etherington (2004), who argues that the power of narrative resides in how people reading the stories of others can find this more meaningful than studies based on more traditional research methodologies. Although Koch and Harrington (1998) suggest there is a risk that writers could be accused of falsification, I feel supported by Gartner's suggestion that 'one can often tell which researchers in our field have spent considerable time intensively involved with entrepreneurs' (Gartner, 2010:7). He suggests that this can make the conclusions ring true for readers and I hope that this is the case for those who engage with this writing. Craig (2009) suggests something similar in drawing on Clandinin et al. (2006:429 cited in Craig, 2009) by suggesting that 'nobody makes up … lives'. However, once written and disseminated I appreciate that I have no influence on how those reading my research will respond. I will not generate a blueprint that other advisers might follow, but this does not mean that it is not possible to draw conclusions from my research or to infer some generalisability. In paying attention to experience, the intention is that others may find resonances within the ideas explored that will inform their understanding of practice and of themselves as practitioners.

Summary of key ideas

In this chapter, I have set out my research method as a process that has evolved over time, supported by group working in which others have encouraged me to engage in writing reflexive narratives. This draws attention to the importance of relationships, to ongoing sense-making with colleagues and clients, and to how a sense of self and other highlights the similarities and differences that can be understood as an emerging dialectic process. In this process, I have found parallels with my experience of advising, further enriching my understanding of practice. Researching and advising are sense-making experiences, and in taking an abductive approach, meaning is continually constructed as we act into the living present. This reflexive approach offers an alternative view to the traditional research on advising practice. However, it is important to recognise that, as with all approaches, there are limitations that need to be considered. Because this is experiential work it is, by its nature, based on individual practice, and this individuality will necessarily limit the conclusions that can be drawn. In the following chapter, I explore the challenges of reflexivity, and how, through themes of stuckness, new understanding can emerge.

Chapter 4 Exploring the dynamics of 'stuckness'

Introduction

In this chapter I am exploring how themes of 'stuckness' arise both when working with others and in my own writing from which learning can emerge. The narratives here present similar themes in different ways. In identifying uncomfortable situations where the flow of conversation becomes stuck, I have become better able to recognise these as opportunities for gaining deeper insight through challenge and provocation. By exploring stuckness I have become more aware of what I have been doing unthinkingly, thus achieving a more conscious awareness of practice. Palmer-Woodward (2007) speaks of how, by staying open to stuck patterns of conversation, something new or novel can emerge as thinking moves from stuck to flowing. In paying attention to this idea, it is possible to explore deeply held views that can feel like a disturbance to how we understand ourselves and others. This reflects Lundquist Coey (2016) discussion of staying with her feelings of discomfort in exploring her practice. In challenging ideas that feel quite static it is possible to open further opportunities to rethink our repetitive patterns of behaviour and to realise that these are not always as static as we had assumed them to be (Wenzel, 2012). Through cultivating a sense of enquiry, this process can be enabling.

Stepping stones and murky water – metaphor as a way of thinking about stuckness

I am mindful as I begin this chapter of a personal experience of stuckness. A few years ago, I felt stuck in my thinking and my writing. As discussed in Chapter 3, one of the desired outcomes of narrative work is that what is written should relay a sense of authenticity that resonates with the reader. Tillmar (2007) suggests that a sense of validity in this type of research approach comes from its richness of description rather than from statistical generalisations. However, I found that, despite writing about advising through drawing on narratives of practice, the response from my supervisors was that 'I' was not in the writing. It made little sense to me that even in writing that felt personal to me 'they' could not find a sense of 'me' within it. This was puzzling and I tried to make sense of why writing about my practice was proving so difficult. A recurring image would come to mind of 'stepping stones and murky water'. In this image, the clearly defined stepping stones hovered above the murky water beneath. The water was green and stagnant, which I interpreted as a representation of my inability to get my writing to flow. It felt comforting to recognise this image of stuckness, although I could not articulate what it meant or how I might use it to overcome the issue raised by my supervisors.

I held on to this metaphor of my stuckness, allowing it to provide me with an explanation of what was influencing my difficulty in writing. I shared my thoughts about this in a phone call to my supervisor, Dorothea, describing this image to her in the following way:

> *I feel that my research has taken on a form like metaphorical stepping stones, which is allowing me to skim (or skip) over the surface of what it is that I am trying to say, rather than to explore the murky waters beneath*.

I waited for Dorothea's reaction, hoping perhaps that she would provide an external solution to my conundrum. Instead, she turned the thinking back to me: '*Hmm ... why do you think the water is murky?'* Why was it murky? I had not thought about this. I felt a jolt of recognition that I had not gone beyond the image in making sense of what it might mean for shifting my stuckness.

As Finlay (2002a:212) suggests, reflexivity can be unsettling, and she links this idea to the 'muddy ambiguity and multiple trails [present] as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self-analysis and self-disclosure'. My metaphor offered a way of exploring my stuckness; however, as Czarniawska (2016:618) suggests, while researchers should keep the metaphors that work, at least for a time, 'the day they begin to restrain thinking, they should be eliminated'. I discovered how difficult it was to do this until ideas had been shared with others, and I identified that my attachment to the image had itself become one of my stepping stones.

Reflecting on Dorothea's question, I thought about aspects of this image that I had not considered before. Why was this image of unfathomable green water playing on my mind? Perhaps this representation of the circular stones was a way of curbing my anxiety, by creating a bounded place of safety. In talking about the recurring image, thoughts and ideas that had not been previously articulated were accessible to me, as I had not only shared this with an 'other', but also with my 'self'. This is an example of how we make our thoughts available as an 'object' to the self. By sharing the narrative about my confusions with stepping stones, I realised that it was not only Dorothea who was hearing about this for the first time. This reflects what Shaw is suggesting when she says:

> The 'edginess' and messiness of spontaneous, rather than rehearsed, speech allows people to discover as they speak what they scarcely realized they thought. We register many subtle responses to what we are saying even as

> we speak and thus come to know what we are talking about in ways that surprise ourselves (Shaw, 2005:21).

Through reflection we make new ways of thinking available to the self, and this can challenge the stuckness which Craig (2009:109) calls 'frozen stories': stuckness that does not allow shifts in knowing and identity. This suggests the way in which narratives offer a rich learning opportunity; however, in challenging stuckness this is not always a comfortable or simple activity.

Exploring stuckness as a response to threats to identity

Up to this point, as a form of research I have been introducing ideas around advising practice as a way of sustaining exploratory conversation. Such ideas also reflect aspects of sustaining conversations with clients. This is exemplified by a particular client meeting.

Frank was the owner of a small manufacturing company who had agreed to a visit from an adviser. I had little information other than the brief comments provided by the marketing team. On arrival, I was let in to a small, cramped office that opened onto a manufacturing area. Frank invited me to sit down. In settling in, I asked some general questions, of the type that would usually elicit some general responses: the '*tell me something about the business*?' sort of questions. It was unexpectedly difficult to sustain conversation, as Frank continually got up and paced the floor. He was distracted, and as his phone began ringing he took several calls, breaking off mid-sentence each time to answer. I felt that he was completely ignoring me until each call was over. In response to phone queries, he walked out to the factory several times, returning to the office to pick up the thread of conversation, only to go off again for the next distraction.

I felt frustrated at his reluctance to engage with me, and annoyed at my inability to engage him in a sustained discussion. This was an unusual situation, and I felt that this was not comfortable for either of us, as we attempted to find something that we could talk about. I remember being particularly aware that he did not seem willing to stay in conversation about his business situation. His defensive answers to what I thought were simple questions led to further questions from me, and I could sense that these follow-up questions were annoying him. It seemed that every question was shut down or ignored, and I felt uncomfortable as he continually changed the subject, rejecting all my attempts to build rapport.

I could not understand his behaviour, which seemed highly anxious. Frank's deflection of my questions was creating anxiety in my own body in response to his energetic pacing. I had no

sense of 'being let in', or of what Siegel (2010) calls a sense of 'feeling felt', which suggests an experience that is felt in the body, by resonating with or becoming attuned to how we are feeling in relation to others. My thoughts were continually shifting in the midst of conversation, which Burkitt (2016) suggests indicates an inner conversation which is reflexively engaging with both personal and impersonal others, such as Mead (1934) talks of as the 'generalised other'. Rather than a form of autonomous thinking separated dualistically from others, Burkitt argues for this being 'an aspect of the relational fabric in which bodily selves are embedded' (ibid:325). As the meeting went on, I was aware of two simultaneous conversations going on: one with Frank and the other in my mind.

In this meeting with Frank, my private conversation was telling me that there was little sense of being seen or recognised as an adviser, or of the conversation moving towards a sense of 'we', and this was very frustrating. I felt ready to give up and began thinking about a way to finish the meeting and leave. Simultaneously, as I sat and continued to talk to him I went through some possible options in my mind. This imagining of what might happen next is the private role play that runs concurrently with the voiced conversation, and it indicates how we might anticipate possible future moves. However, this process always leaves the opportunity for novelty and surprise in the event of responses differing from what is expected (Shotter, 2011). In all client meetings, there is a bringing together of threads to create an ending, for example in agreeing actions and arranging a follow-up meeting. Where there is little opportunity to go beyond a first meeting, a way of winding up might be the offering of something tangible, to give a sense that, as 'an adviser', I am leaving the client having provided some advice. This might include things such as formulaic factsheets, information, or initiatives, which might relate to a particular thread of conversation. I am wary of suggesting that these offer anything more than ideas or ways of thinking as bases for further discussion, but they can feel like a safety net one can rely on. They can also buy some time, as they can be less threatening than questions that might continue to provoke or challenge, and they might also be 'get outs' too. With Frank, an idea came to my mind regarding some free training on offer. I guessed he would reject this along with all my other attempts to engage, and imagined it would then give me the chance to leave. Stacey (2005b:480) talks of how, when we get stuck in patterns of conversation, it can feel 'deadening, oppressive and neurotic', whereas in more explorative conversation we can feel enlivened by opportunities for 'spontaneity and creativity'. When I asked tentatively, '*Do you think that you might be interested in management training*…?' I was ready to walk away from the meeting, as I felt stuck and restricted, but suddenly Frank's manner changed. At the word 'training' his energy shifted, he stopped pacing the floor, sat down and talked in a way that had been absent before.

Frank confided that he had never had any management training – he was unsure about what he was supposed to be doing when managing the business. Siegel (2016) points to Jerome Bruner's advice to him that narrative does not happen within a person, it happens between people, reflecting how the narratives of our lives are always constructed in interaction with others (Bruner, 2004). Frank went on to describe how, when he shut the door and it was just him in the office, he would end up going back out onto the shop floor to carry on making things, as this was what he felt more comfortable doing. In that moment, I felt for the first time we had a sense of emotional connection. Stacey (2005b) argues that identity is simultaneously individual and social. One of Frank's concerns was that his wife was about to graduate as an accountant, and this seemed to be unsettling for him. I sensed that her increased knowledge was changing how he saw himself, and that his identity was challenged. Frank voiced fears that his wife would find out the business was not doing well, or might get a job and leave him to run the company alone. As we talked, these fears became part of the conversation in the present, rather than remaining concealed within his private conversation and an unchallenged projected future.

Exploring the emergence of identity in client–adviser relations

The meeting with Frank reflects the sense of finding a way around in negotiating the way of going on together. Kets de Vries (2009) explores the relational aspect of consulting as a form of dance, related to implicit pattern recognition from past learning intuitively influencing how we work together. He talks of how we experience subtle 'out-of-awareness dialogues', becoming aware that something has happened during an exchange that touches us in some way, the reason for which we do not really understand. I would argue that these ideas are called out in relation to the immediate and local situation rather than in fixed patterns. Talking of negotiation as a form of dance resonates with me as I had originally been trained as a dancer and ran several dance schools prior to working in a family business, CasanCo. Coming from a dance background, the relationship between an individual and the music is one that I have experienced as fluid and responsive. Others have drawn on ideas of improvisation reflecting organisational life. Noble (2004) suggests links between jazz and improvisation in setting up and running a small-business project. Similarly Clegg et al. (2004) see jazz improvisation as a metaphor reflecting how new language and meaning can evolve in our participation with others. Larsen (2005) has written extensively about his drama-based work, with improvisation used to explore limitations to innovative behaviour – another form of stuckness. Conversation itself can be seen as improvisational, with the influence of many conversations in different places and times that lead to a coming together in a moment of time (Noble, 1999). These ideas are in

tension with more formal views that reflect a less responsive understanding of communication in advising activities.

Schein (2002:26) asks the question 'How then does the conversation evolve to create a relationship in which the two parties will hear each other, understand each other, and give each other what each needs?' In answering his question he uses a model similar to Shannon and Weaver's (1949) model of communication in which there is a discrete demarcation between a sender and a receiver, and a clear message sent and understood. Schein suggests that, as the client 'unfolds' their story, a series of mutual 'tests' is being performed, to discover at what level each party can accept the other. This overlooks the social complexity of what is going on, with dualistic 'if …then' models of communication implying that this process can then be used instrumentally by the consultant to achieve a specific outcome. A more responsive view of communication is not formed of parcels of information passed from one to another.

Kets de Vries suggests an alternative view, based on psychology, that makes assumptions of individual action as detached from the social context, arguing that 'astute consultants use transference data as a vital source of information' (Kets de Vries, 2009:12). His use of the word 'data' suggests something fixed that can be acted upon. Kets de Vries goes on to say consultants can then use this information to change the 'script' of the client. This contrasts with the view of Flinn and Mowles (2014), who see conversation as an iterative, sense-making interaction in which meaning goes beyond words. This latter explanation resonates more closely with experience.

The metaphor I started with, of stepping stones separated from the murky water, represents something of the challenges I faced in writing about the dualism inherent in the messiness which is edited out in needing to focus on what can be measured. What comes to mind as I read about advice in the literature is the separation between the adviser, the client and the advice (for example see Johnson et al., 2007, Robson and Bennett, 2000, Mole, 2002b, Mole and Bramley, 2006). In the literature that sets up a dualism and separates the adviser from the client, there is a disconnection from the social context of advising. Dalley and Hamilton (2000), for example, in writing about the adviser–client relationship, point to a disparity in the background of the adviser and client that might lead to an unwillingness for clients to 'open up' and present their problems. This positions advice in a spatial context, where expert knowledge from one context can be transferred to another. Reid et al. (2013) suggest that dissatisfaction may arise because clients want to 'learn' rather than 'be taught', although they see this as more of an issue to be overcome, rather than a way of increasing social interaction. Other research explores

advisers as ‘sounding boards’ (Hjalmarsson and Johansson, 2003, Mole and Keogh, 2009). In this approach, the adviser takes up a responsive role that enables a diagnostic process to take place; however, this perspective also overlooks a relational understanding. This tension suggests the challenge of dualism, but as Newton (2003:434) points out, it is also the case that an uncritical commitment to ‘narratives of wholeness’ may be problematic, as it can ‘blind us to the relative differences’ from which deeper meaning can arise.

Hicks (2010) is critical of the expectation, found in consultancy literature based on large corporate clients, that the advice-giver provides the answer to a defined problem. Addressing this issue based on practical experience, Hicks et al. (2009) make the case for a practice-based view, suggesting that the concept of knowledge can be understood differently when seen as a social process, similar to a view of the consultant–client relationship as one of ‘co-production’ (Bäcklund and Werr, 2008). This resonates more closely with the stance I am taking here in challenging how advice is discussed in relation to smaller firms. The narrative of the meeting with Frank is an exploration of how, in the short time that is available for a visit, there can be an experience of moving from ‘stranger’ to ‘confidante’, but this is never a certainty. In some ways, reflective practices can be seen as threatening, as they encourage us to address difficult personal and organisational issues (Ghaye, 2000). However, as a relationship evolves, shifts in energy and vitality can call out narratives and stories that sustain exploratory conversation. It can be messy, unpredictable and often surprising. It can also be rewarding, and when a meeting finishes with a client with seemingly increased awareness, or with new ideas created, it feels that this is what being a business adviser is about.

What particularly concerns me, as became apparent to Hicks (2010) in the course of his research, is that the view of small-business advice literature places little value on the advising relationship as constructed in a social or relational way. I have talked of how government-funded support is most often discussed in terms of economic models. However, Dyer and Ross (2007) use qualitative interviews with advisers to get a sense of what it is like to advise the small-business client. They develop a view of the typical business adviser as coming from a professional background and offering expert advice. In a study of government-funded business advising in Sweden, Tillmar (2007) points out that the majority of advisers in her study were male. She identifies them as coming from a similar professional background to the one Dyer and Ross identified in their study based in Canada. Tillmar discusses how she had concerns over the gendered nature of advice and noted that, while the project was focused on female entrepreneurs, the way clients were chosen reflected a gender-bias that had not occurred in other programmes. She uses an example of a female entrepreneur from the beauty industry who

was not included, despite the fact that the business had high growth potential. She talks of how this manicurist was rejected over other business owners, even though she was involved in imports and sales beyond her local business area. Tillmar suggests that this was because she did not fit the stereotypical preconceptions of what constitutes an entrepreneur.

This introduces questions of gender and identity to the research, although I recognise there is no space to develop these themes fully here. These gender themes can be seen in the work of Dyer and Ross (2007), although they are not recognised as such. They mention that some advisers complained that their clients were resistant to 'opening up', thus presenting the adviser with a problem. They quote one adviser, who says:

> The women become very frustrated and tend to give up too quickly for reasons that they have not conveyed to us thoroughly … for many women, problems that they consider to be a volcano, we would consider to be a hill. They do not realize that these problems are something that they can get over eventually (Dyer and Ross 2007:140).

This jumps out at me as being extremely pejorative regarding female business owners, an attitude that I recognise from personal experience.

Reflecting on experience, a situation comes to mind regarding a client complaint that came into Business Link, and which I was asked to follow up with a visit. The client, Jane, had written a letter to the Chief Executive about a meeting she had with one of the adviser team. I was asked if I could do something to appease the client, and to gain her confidence prior to the customer satisfaction survey that was going out to clients. I went to talk to the adviser, Tim, an ex-bank manager with a specialism in advising on finance issues, who had been to see her. He told me to '*watch out as she is a very difficult woman'*. Rather wary and not knowing what to expect, I went to see her at her home-based business a few days later. Our conversation led to some interesting ideas that Jane could consider. As I was leaving she held my hand and said '*Thank you, I just wanted to be listened to'*. In drawing on this short narrative, I am reminded of the humanness of advising that can be swept away in a focus on defined problems, set-piece actions and evaluation processes.

While I had not considered gender to be a theme initially, I realise that there are gendered experiences that have influenced my practice. In reading the quote from Dyer and Ross, I am aware of why I might have become unhappy with my advising relationship with Jonathan, who expected me to respond to his particular way of working. A short anecdote comes to mind from when I presented my first conference paper in 2005. At the end, a question was posed by a man at the back of the room: '*Do you think that being a woman makes a difference to the work that*

you do?' I responded by saying that I did not think that this was the case. I would answer very differently now, as I reflect on experience and on my evolving practice. These considerations of gender are not fixed but emerge in the relational process, where people can constitute themselves as gendered in a taken-for-granted way (Speer and Stokoe, 2011). I had sought out what seemed to be practical support, but what started out as a way of talking about the challenges at CasanCo became rigidly set in the solutions-focused approach that Jonathan was taking. Although I am aware of a risk of reifying these as masculine behaviours rather than as the influences of management and institutional norms, I know that the experiences of working with Jonathan, and the comments directed towards me by Colin, as discussed in Chapter 2, made me determined to sustain conversation rather than shut it down. In taking up the role of training and development manager in 2006, I similarly encouraged all advisers to be mindful that this was an essential part of the role.

Finding ways to understand practice emerging in the midst of relating

In the previous chapter, I introduced my research methodology, critiquing the dualism of Kant's philosophy that is reflected in the traditional view of organisations as bounded entities, and which positions advising as an intervention in the organisational system. In his critique of Kant, Hegel's work argues for a dialectic approach to knowledge as being perpetually constructed in our social relations with others and the world. I linked this approach to that of Elias (1956) and the view of involved detachment. There are a number of writers who take a similar view of organisation as emerging in social and relational processes, thus shifting the focus away from the autonomous individual as the focus of research. Shotter (2008a) writes about what is happening in our day-to-day conversation with others, considering crucial features of a conversational world. It was through the idea of conversational realities in Shotter's (1993, 2008a) work that I began to articulate my own practice. Shotter and Cunliffe talk about the 'view from within':

> We must begin the aim of trying to reveal the beginnings of a new way of doing things, in our everyday activities, by reminding ourselves of the momentary nature of our access to such organisational landscapes, that their nature is not continuously accessible to external public scrutiny, and that their 'shapes' become known to us only from within our particular, momentary, living involvements in them' (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2002:20).

What the authors are paying attention to here is how we make sense within the everyday flow of conversation, and this resonates with how I have come to talk about my own sense of 'being'

an adviser. The idea of 'being let in' has similarities to their view of access being potentially fleeting, and reflects the challenge of shifting to conversation that is more meaningful. Ghaye (2000:7) suggests that reflective practice is about questioning, doubting and exploring in such a way that others are 'allowed in' to sense and feel what the writer wishes to express. However, finding ways to represent this flow in writing is difficult, particularly in a field of research that is so strongly systems based. My metaphor of the stepping stones reflects something of this. Laurel Richardson (Ellis et al., 2008), in talking of a similar struggle, says:

> ... finding myself unable to write. I was frozen. The crisis of representation had truly hit me. I didn't know how to write. For whom do I write? Whose life can I write? What do I say? At the same time, I was experiencing the tension between two sides of myself: the scientist and the poet. I wanted to feel more integrated. How was I going to put myself together (Ellis et al., 2008:265)?

Her angst resonates with my struggle with writing, and my visual image of the stepping stones and murky water seemed to be representing a similar crisis. Anzul and Ely (1988, cited in Ghaye, 2000) talk of working reflectively as making a space to think, where we are 'crossing the stagnant moat' between what we do and what we might aspire to do in the future. The imagery of the moat resonates with the stagnancy that I felt in terms of my 'murky water'.

Elias (2008) uses a 'parable' to explain the reflective process. In the story, three fishermen brothers were engulfed by the raging sea in a maelstrom. In the midst of this terrifying situation, one of the fishermen falls overboard and dies, but another is distracting himself from the danger by watching the patterning of the debris in the vortex in which he, his remaining brother and the boat are being sucked down. In this thinking process, an idea comes to him of how he might be able to save himself and his brother. Despite being encouraged to listen to the idea that might save him, the second brother becomes paralysed by fear and he goes down with the boat. However, the middle brother is rescued alive, having thought through a possible theory for survival based on the objects that were spinning around in the maelstrom in which he was caught up. The context of the parable is from a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Descent into the Maelstrom* (Poe and Gregg, 1960). Elias suggests that this story reflects that:

> the greater the dangers are, the less able people are to think in a manner adequate to the reality of the situation ... they are caught in a vicious circle. Only if one can stand back, if one can detach oneself and comprehend the

> situation, can one succeed in recognising the connections that can lead to safety (2008:136).

The deeper meaning Elias took from Poe's original story was the parallels it draws with our human capacity to reflect. It occurs to me that in the telling and retelling of stories, things that strike us can inform the thinking of others, serving different purposes. I am mindful of how my conversation with Frank served as a way of giving him some space to think about what was going on for him. Elias is not suggesting a separation between thinking and acting, but is viewing them as an integrated paradoxical process that calls to mind the private conversation I have been exploring. Unlike the process of systems thinking, which proposes a detached view, in problem solving in this way Elias does not see abstracting and immersing as polarised, but suggests we can never be fully immersed or fully detached from any social activity (Elias, 1956, Mennell, 1992).

Katz and Shotter (1996:920) talk of 'poetic moments' to describe how a listener can be 'moved', 'arrested' or 'struck' by certain words 'within oneself, and in conversation with others'. Frank's response to the word 'training' could be seen in this way. I recognise the dynamic tensions between the sense of stuckness and the shift to the sense of movement as being related to a 'being let in' experience. While I have found Shotter's work resonates with what I am trying to communicate when I talk of my practice, I have also found some rigidity in the way he describes experience. Katz and Shotter argue that it is in this process that the interviewer is let into the world of the other; however, there is a suggestion that the therapist is an external observer of this 'poetic moment', reinforcing the spatial nature of the 'patient' (or 'client') relationship.

In later work, Shotter addresses this issue of being outside experience, stating that 'we must think dynamically, in terms of anticipating the responses to our actions, as well as thinking in terms of anticipating the responses of other people to each other' (Shotter, 2008b:520). This does seem to have similarities to the responsive process examined in the work of Mead (1934) and Siegel (2016). A point of difference, however, is Shotter's conclusion, which reflects something of the *a priori* categories we can come to know, rather than seeing these as arising in relation with others. Shotter suggests that we need to:

> ask ourselves questions such as: What kind of person is involved here? What kind of person is involved there? What kinds of things would they say or do in this situation, in that situation, or in some other situation, and so on? And also, go on to answer these questions concretely so as to reproduce the tone

> and accent of the speakers involved, thus to imaginatively enter into their world to grasp the way in which they are using their words (Shotter, 2008b:521).

This resembles the ideas of private conversation and silent role play discussed in this chapter; however, I am less comfortable with the idea that this forms a concrete understanding of the speakers. The term 'being let in' might suggest the idea of being able to enter the world of the other that I would now argue is not possible. In this way, I have come to recognise that Shotter's understanding of the conversational process 'from within' our involvement, maintains the dualism of inside/outside, further suggesting a spatial separation. While initially helpful, the labels Shotter puts on social interaction create the effect of arresting, rather than sustaining, conversational flow. An example is his term 'poised resourcefulness' (Shotter, 2009:24). This term became 'a stepping stone' in my early writing, as I used it to talk about my advising practice. Being able to draw on a range of 'possibilities' helps to find ways to 'go on' in current circumstances, and Shotter suggests that this can:

> offer us the possibility of our developing the capacity to enter each new and unique situation we encounter in our professional lives with a range of relevant responses to whatever contingencies – to do with human bewilderments, disorientations, puzzlements, feelings, emotions, and many other human disturbances we might meet there – 'at the ready', so to speak (Shotter, 2009:24).

These puzzlements and disturbances seemed more real to me than the abstract views on advising that were so prevalent in the literature. Initially I was keen to take up this idea of what I was doing with clients. However, the idea that we have 'at the ready' a range of 'relevant' responses is more difficult to support. Although I could argue that the folder of information I took out with me was a tangible response to the uncertainty of client meetings, the emergence of advice was different. Writing in a way that does not fall into this trap of systems boundaries has remained a challenge, but paying attention to these struggles has given me new ways to talk about practice.

While Shotter clearly recognises the relational aspect of 'practice', what I find lacking is the paradoxical, simultaneous sense of 'within and between' from which the sense of 'mind' is emerging that Mead (1934), Siegel (2016) and others, such as Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000), talk about. In taking up Hegel's dialectic process, Mead (1934) identifies a relationship between 'I' and 'me' as emerging in social interaction, with the 'me' arising from within our social

experience and giving rise to the private conversation that forms a commentary to our interaction with others. Following on from Mead, the private conversation of an individual mind and the public communication of the social are the same phenomenon (Stacey et al., 2000). This is what Mead called the emergence of the 'generalised other' (1934). However, all participants bring others into the room, both from past socialisation called out in private conversation and in what they share more openly in the present. Drawing on a complexity perspective, this inevitably increases the potential for novelty and spontaneity that cannot be predicted in advance.

In thinking about how my private conversation influenced the outcome with Frank I have come to recognise this as a responsive and dynamic process, both responding locally and at the same time abstracting from experience (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). This reflects how our sense of self arises from the social relations between individuals (Burkitt, 1991). I would argue that in conversation with Frank I was continually responding to what was coming up, but I cannot argue that any of the responses were formed *a priori*, and thus were ready to be called upon. The concerns that he was facing led to a sense of stuckness that was incomprehensible until he began talking about what was going on for him and making his private conversation open to reflection. I have to remember that it was not through prior knowledge that the conversation shifted, it was in trying to extricate myself from the meeting.

New perspectives on stuckness – reflecting on CasanCo

I started this chapter with a narrative about an image that stayed in my mind when I was struggling with writing up this research. In thinking about writing, and the complaint that 'I' was not in the writing, I have revealed similar patterns in my meeting with Frank, in terms of my sense of him not being fully present in the conversation. Siegel (2012) suggests that collaborative communication allows minds to connect responsively to each other, a sense of 'attunement', or of 'feeling felt'. In a similar way, I can see that my reticence to talk of my experience at CasanCo was partly to do with not wanting to expose my feelings to the group, and this is why initially it rarely entered into my writing. In staying with this experience, I have been able to understand it and similar situations from a different perspective, by situating myself with others and the challenges we faced together. To explain this further I include one further narrative as an example of how I now understand the dynamics of stuckness.

I have talked briefly about how my work at CasanCo led up to my becoming an adviser, and I am mindful that it has not been easy to find ways of sharing what was an emotional experience. Talking about business failure is both arduous and painful and, at least in the short term, it can

have an impact on many aspects of how you see yourself (Cope, 2011). I certainly felt that it was difficult to talk about the closure of the business initially in our group discussions. While there is an argument that without a few failures notched up you are not a true 'entrepreneur', in research on business failure there is also a view that without reflexivity learning does not take place (Byrne and Shepherd, 2015). In writing about my sense of being 'stuck', I realised that not wanting to talk about this time was constraining how I could reflect on the learning it had brought to me. Getting caught up with feelings of loss, shame and disappointment was making my own reflexive process difficult to undertake; this meant that I was separating out advising practice from the social experience that I had gained in this business situation.

This plays some part in the stuckness that I felt, not only in my writing but also in my thinking about CasanCo. In being encouraged to share and write about experience through my narratives with the PhD group, I can see how my understanding of the CasanCo experience has continued to develop. In retelling the stories, exploring them as webs of social and relational interaction, I have found them less fixed and less like the stepping stones of my metaphor. Cope (2011) comes to a similar conclusion in his study of failure, in arguing that addressing failure openly forced participants to critically examine their underlying assumptions, a process of learning that then influenced future actions. Taking this research approach has increased my awareness of how we are all stuck within a web of constraining and enabling relationships (Nolan, 2005, Elias and Scotson, 1994). It has taken some time to realise this in relation to CasanCo.

Patterns of stuckness – the challenges of responding to 'Japanese junk'

In Appendix 1, I talk about my experience at CasanCo, and how I had not previously considered my introduction to the CasanCo team. In some ways, I could argue that I was 'parachuted in' to a company that had been in existence for over twenty years when I arrived. Many of the staff had been there for most of that time, and this left me struggling to find my place and feel accepted. I never considered at the time what effect my 'crash landing' was having on others. Paradoxically, on the one hand I knew little about the business while on the other, as the wife of the chairman, I had access to privileged information that was inaccessible to others. In a way described by Elias and Scotson (1994), I was unwittingly caught up with an established group as Roy's wife, but also felt like an outsider when it came to other group dynamics. This played out in my daily work, where I started out supporting the administration of the export packing and freight forwarding business. I felt sadly lacking in the skills displayed by others. I did not have the decades of experience that Roy had of the business as a whole, or that Natalie and Samantha (who had welcomed me) had in the office.

One of the challenges of well-established small firms is the presence of long-established working practices – the rituals and routines that form what seems like a stable and predictable set of processes to guide daily activities (Jones, 2006). Roy had once told me that 'the business runs itself' in response to my questions about all the different things I needed to learn, which seemed overwhelming at times. At this time, in 1994, computers were just becoming part of the business vocabulary and Roy had mentioned that I might like to explore how we could employ them in our activities in the office. I jumped at the chance, possibly because it was a way I could make my own mark. I felt that this was an area in which I could bring something new to the company. Reflecting on this now, I would say that I naively took on the challenge without considering how new ways of working would be received by others, sometimes even being seen by them as threats.

When working at CasanCo I was embarking on an Open University degree and this was my first introduction to computing, at the time a new field of study for business, which helped me to see how we might introduce computing systems. Having made the decision to take an OU degree in the year before starting work at CasanCo, I found that its Technology strand would teach me how to use a 'standard business computer'. This was in the days before Windows changed how we use computers, and at the end of the course I had learned the basics of DOS, a clunky programme called Frameworks and a rudimentary grasp of spreadsheets. This meant that, as computers were new to the company, this was an area where I felt a few steps ahead of my colleagues. Incrementally, I began to work on areas at CasanCo where I thought that we could introduce computing, speeding up repetitive tasks and making information more accessible to all. In taking up the challenge of computerisation, I recognised that I was lacking in experience of management, although I was learning about it through my studies. In the second year I took a course entitled 'Managing in Organisations', as I felt that this would give me business skills I felt that I lacked. What I was not aware of at the time was that this course was based on 'systems thinking', drawing on the work of theorists who were using systems-based modelling to develop problem solving from a systems perspective (Checkland, 1985, Checkland and Scholes, 1990;2000, Jackson, 2000, Wilson, 2001). This was my first introduction to management theory, revealing to me the dualisms that separate out planning and implementation as the norm. I welcomed the sense of certainty the approach offered, which was attractive to me in contrast to the complexity of everyday life. I also see that it was in trying to implement these ideas that I developed my approach to introducing computers to the company. It strikes me that this is not unlike the basis of my metaphor of the stepping stones hovering above the murky, unfathomable water beneath.

Samantha's husband, James Sparrow, was the managing director. He had taken over the role about ten years before from Roy. In the day-to-day activities of the firm, it always seemed to be Roy that people came to with problems. James did not have the shipping knowledge of other colleagues; much of his time was involved with detailed writing up of ledgers of materials, stock and costings, and preparing invoices to be typed by the office. These ledgers were almost like works of art, the blue ink from his fountain pen flowing into neat and orderly handwriting. He took great pride in them and every month there would be a long process of adding up all the columns contained in these books. They took up a large amount of his time. As a manufacturing-based company, calculations were key to what we were doing, and as I found out more about CasanCo's working practices, the more it became clear that we had the potential to convert to computerised processes that would save time. Computerisation was also justified by the fact that it had the potential to reduce errors in calculations for timber, materials and costs. We had already worked on changing over the sales and purchase ledgers, a repetitive job that often fell to me and that I found onerous. James' area of activity was one that was fairly simple to computerise. However, when I made this suggestion, it led to angry outbursts.

As I write about this now, I can see the problems that arose from not considering this change from his perspective. It never occurred to me that, in seeking to find my place at CasanCo, I was challenging the way that we were all working together. At the time, I felt pleased to be making a difference. However, James would make comments that were upsetting. He was obstructive, loudly and continually dismissing computers as 'Japanese junk', perhaps seeing me, as well as the computers, as some kind of invasion. This came to an impasse on a particular day when James made a statement that he could add up a column of figures more accurately and quickly than any computer. It was ridiculous, but, responding to the situation, Roy suggested that I took him up on his challenge. In a showdown, we had a head-to-head and the computer got there first. I provided him with a total. His figures were different to mine and his delight was visible – '*you see – it can't even get the total right*'. In looking more closely at the figures, Roy pointed out that it was a difference of rounding up. The small decimal differences reflected that the figures from the computer were more accurate than those that James had created. This gave me some sense of justification for pursuing the project, and supported by Roy, I felt victorious and vindicated at the time. This is not the feeling I have now writing about it, and as I reflect back I can see that in challenging the practices that he held dear I was challenging his sense of self and his identity within the company. I am struck by Nolan's (2009:101) view:

> We can see, because of our mutual interdependence and therefore mutual constraint, people within a situation may prevent each other from exploring the tradition of argumentation because of the anxiety inherent in the unravelling of the identities involved.

My lack of awareness of the interdependence of individuals in this context meant that opportunities to talk more about how this change of working practices might affect others were missed.

Stacey et al. (2000) draw on analogies from complexity theories to suggest that our experiences of organisations emerge as dynamic patterns of stable instability. These patterns include the mess, the ambiguity, contradictions and paradoxes that arise from trying to get things done with other people (Mowles, 2015). What I have come to understand about this situation is how invested we become in our own intentions, and that we lose sight of how we are always caught up in relation with others. Discussing my attempts to introduce computing practices to the company reminds me of how easy it is to get caught up in abstract activities in the form of a project that can be 'implemented', taking us away from paying attention to the social responses to change. As I reflect on this time, I would argue that staying with the conflict and anxieties of that time, and exploring what it meant for us, may have reduced the conflict, but I cannot know that this would have made a difference to the outcomes at CasanCo.

Summary of key ideas

In bringing together three quite different themes, I am paying attention to business activity as being composed of dynamic patterns of stability and instability. I have focused on stuckness in particular, but this is not a 'both/and' duality. I am exploring this as paradoxical tension, in which the capacity for novelty and change arises in the tensions of stability and instability (Stacey et al., 2000). It is in these patterns of stuckness and flow that identity arises as I have reflected on self and others. As I write, I recognise parallels between the situation with James Sparrow and the concerns that Frank had about his management skills, in that both reflect threats to identity. Learning requires an openness in finding new meaning from situations that may not fit into current knowledge (Béres, 2017). My own stuckness reflects something similar. I felt challenged by feelings of failure about CasanCo, but in staying with a reflective stance, and by engaging with others in the PhD group, despite feeling unsettled new possibilities to understanding practice were opened up.

This is different from the systems-based ideas that are taken up in mainstream management literature, and that had led me to work with these abstract models for the implementation of the

computer project without considering the social consequences. It is also different from the tendency of the literature about advising to follow similar modes of thinking regarding advising practice. In this way, by paying attention to experience, I have gained a sense of the dynamics of stuckness, in tension with the idea of flow that is represented here by the sense of 'being let in'. This has created a way of understanding what is taking place in the present. In the next chapter, I explore these emergent patterns further.

Chapter 5 Exploring advising practice as reflective enquiry

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss advising as 'practice', exploring how meaning is co-constructed, reinforced and disrupted in responsive conversation. Conversation is more than language and words, and here I am exploring the flow of conversation as emergent narrative from which meaning arises. I am suggesting that advising takes the form of reflective enquiry in which opportunities arise for adviser and client to explore new ways of thinking and working together. The processual nature of reflective enquiry will be further developed, drawing on the work of Mead (1934). His idea of a 'conversation of gestures' reflects the responsive and iterative way that meaning emerges. This leads onto the concept of 'mind' as felt experience and knowing within human relating that Siegel (2012, 2016) argues is at the heart of social being.

Exploring the tensions of stability and change in the context of advising – Industrial Wheel Co

We are participants in worlds that we come to know through our social actions, where knowing and acting are inextricably intertwined (Simpson, 2009). It is in this spontaneous and unpredictable process that an understanding of similarity and difference emerges simultaneously for adviser and client (Shaw, 2002, Palmer-Woodward, 2007). In 2003, after my induction as a business adviser had finished, I knew I that would have to get out and meet clients. I was quite anxious about getting started. Despite being given lots of information on the contractual requirements of the role, relating to 'what' we needed to do, there was little advice given on 'how' to work with clients. I took a call in the office from a business owner, Tom Jameson, who wanted to discuss marketing. The call came as an opportunity to get a client visit on my list of activities for the month and to get out of the office. We talked for some time on the phone, and although I felt that I did not know much about marketing specifically, I offered an adviser visit. We agreed that we would meet at his premises a few days later.

Arriving at the busy industrial park, I found a parking space a little way from the premises. I walked along the street to the company with my folder in hand. Looking around at the buildings nearby it was noticeable that the modern glass and metal car showrooms on the opposite side of the road were in stark contrast to the client's premises. The building was old-fashioned and functional: a two-storied, flat-roofed, pebble-dashed structure that stood on a small plot. I pushed open the door to *Industrial Wheel Co Ltd,* which opened into a small lobby. There was a closed door at the far end. To my right there was a sliding partition in the wall, built up with layers of yellowing gloss paint, and next to it a bell push. I rang the bell. After a few moments,

the partition was pulled back sharply, and a fierce-looking lady looked out. '*Yes?*' she enquired. I said I had a meeting with Mr Jameson. '*Wait there*.' The partition shut with a bang and I was left standing alone.

These moments, waiting for a client to arrive, were a chance to take a breath and get a sense of what was going on around me. I surveyed the lobby. A picture came to mind that the space seemed like a vacuum, similar to those seen on a submarine, or a space ship, where you have to close one door behind you before you can go on. I had no idea what was on the other side of the door. Standing there alone, getting a sense of the place heightened my awareness. Thoughts came and went. I was anxious about how the meeting would go as I was new to the job, and a thought came to mind that I was not the marketing specialist that had been asked for. There was also a vague sense of uncertainty that played in my mind. There have been occasions where I have turned up to a meeting but it has not taken place for some reason. I have experienced the discomfort of finding out that, when you arrive, a meeting has been forgotten or is not convenient. Until the door in the lobby opened, and I was physically 'let in', there was no certainty that there would be the opportunity for the advising conversation to take place at all.

Standing and waiting I noticed that the walls and ceiling looked as if they had been white, maybe forty years before, but like the glossed partition, they had a yellow tinge. A smell permeated the space. It was distinctive, not unpleasant, but with an acrid industrial edge to it. There was a notice board and functional posters on the wall relating to public liability insurance and health and safety and other information. This was something familiar. I am reminded that in working with others there is always a future that is given shape by history for all parties, recognising that client meetings are a process of simultaneous continuity and potential transformation. History is always open to further shaping, as the patterning process of communicative action (Shaw, 2002). At CasanCo, we had similar boards in place. These posters proclaimed that you had the correct safety standards in place, information that served a regulatory purpose but was rarely looked at other than for annual updating. Using these moments to get a sense of orientating ones 'self' often calls out a visceral sense of recognition of particular sights and sounds, which at the time are not well formed. This brings similarity and difference together.

Knowing within awareness – emergence of 'mind' as an social and relational experience

In a silent conversation, I was thinking about what might happen next. I have suggested a similar process happened when I was waiting for Peter to come downstairs and was becoming aware of the orderliness of what I could see around me. At Industrial Wheel Co, there was a

sense of both familiarity and strangeness in these surroundings. The similarities to CasanCo and the feelings brought to mind giving me a sense of this company, calling out meaning beyond the physical surroundings. Self-dialogue comes from the imagination, where private conversation arises in the mind as we imagine what others may be thinking and saying about us and projecting how others might see us and our actions (Burkitt, 2012). Mead (1934) talks about this calling out of past experience as interdependent with others. Drawing on behavioural psychology, Mead suggests that symbols, stimulating a complex range of feelings, thoughts and emotions, are brought into consciousness in the present, priming the individual for a response:

> If you recognise somebody it must be through the fact that you have seen that individual in the past, but the individual must be there, or somebody like him, in order that this may take place (Mead, 1934:116).

What I take from these ideas is that how we respond is directly caught up in what is happening in the present moment. Standing in the lobby waiting, it was not a 'somebody' that called out the similarities but the artefacts bringing these memories to mind. At Industrial Wheel Co, it was the paint, the posters, the smell that all carried meaning for me.

Each client situation will have its own patterning, taking place in a time and a place that make each experience unique. This does not however mean that each one is a new beginning. Stacey (2003b) argues that our interaction in the present will be evolving or elaborating through what we have previously said or done being brought into awareness. He says that:

> In the living present, individuals are interacting with each other in their own local situations. The basis of their action is their current expectations of the future, conditioned by their accounts of the past, where those accounts of the past are influencing expectations for the future and expectations of the future are influencing the current accounts of the past (Stacey, 2003b:330).

In standing there, waiting to be let in, a mix of intentions was playing out in my mind. I had targets to hit, frustrations and disappointments from past business experience playing in my mind and apprehensions about the door opening, about how to start the meeting and about what we would talk about. These thoughts came and went as I stood and waited. The present is always entangled with a past that continues to act as a changing force on the present and the future. Paying attention to experience makes feelings and thoughts open to examination, in the form of structured reflexivity (Brannick and Coghlan, 2006), but it also reflects a complex

process of habit, memory and chance that shapes our experience and understanding (Loewen Walker, 2014). As I read this over a decade after the meeting took place, I still have a visceral sense of it, as well as a picture that is conjured up as I call it to mind.

Practice as responsive understanding of self and other

In advising and consulting activity, conversation focuses on business activity. It is common to talk of organisations as fixed entities in which client and adviser stand outside the activity taking place, acting as observers and seekers of problems and solutions. At Business Link, many advice initiatives were addressed towards 'firms' rather than individuals, and this meant that support was often standardised (Rigby and Ramlogan, 2013). This view pervades the research on small firms and discussions of how 'organisations' learn (Sadler-Smith et al., 1999, Jones, 2006), and how this relates to knowledge creation (Dalley and Hamilton, 2000, Zhang et al., 2004, Mole, 2007). Alvesson and Johansson (2002:234) identify the rhetoric around advising activity, identifying labels given to those involved in advising activity, such as 'esoteric expert' or a 'trader in trouble'. Power relating themes are suggested within these descriptions of activity, in that, for the relationship to continue, the adviser or consultant negotiates a particular role or professional identity, with the client taking up a corresponding role. Control is the basis of assumptions about the 'expert' view of advice-giving, giving primacy to individual agency. In practice, these are not 'set-piece' relationships, as they will be negotiated continually in ongoing conversation. In this way, the adviser does not have the freedom to act in any way they choose (Hicks, 2010). This view of shifting power resonates with Elias (Elias and Scotson, 1994, Mennell, 1992) who argues that we are all enabled and constrained by our relationships with others. However, there is little discussion in the mainstream literature that seeks to understand power relationships between consultants and their clients (Mowles, 2009). In evaluating Business Link advising, there is little research undertaken that takes a situated view of this as a social activity where these shifts can be explored.

In the view of advising activity as a form of intervention by an advice-giver who exists outside the boundary of the organisation, there is little recognition that, as well as the adviser relationship, the concept of organisation is also a construct. This resonates with Elias' description of the figurations, or webs, of people engaged in ongoing power relations from which the organisation 'becomes' (Mowles, 2011). Advising will always be temporary and transient. In talking about CasanCo I am aware of how there was no sense of a bounded 'organisation', other than as a legal entity on paper. Working with clients from this perspective becomes a process of paying attention to organisational patterns as characteristics of stability

and instability (Stacey, 2005a), rather than as standardised processes that can be replicated across many contexts.

In the view of the American pragmatists, and of Dewey in particular, it is argued that becoming knowledgeable occurs through experience, and that the separation of thinking and acting prevents learning taking place in an informed or intelligent way (Elkjaer, 2008). In taking a narrative approach, Dewey's (1938) view of how we shape and are shaped by experiences in context can be further explored (Craig, 2009). The view of advising taken here is different from the systems-based view which sees the past unfolding into a predictable future, and in which we can take control of the process, like a journey from one point to another. Experience shapes our actions in the present, and perceptions of issues and understanding of change arise in our local interaction as communicating bodies (Shaw, 2002). This is a situated position. Making sense of advising without considering it as a bodily experience overlooks the way in which:

> social interactions with others produce self-feeling through which we sense and perceive ourselves within the world, and this motivates responses and actions that feed back into the world of interaction with others (Burkitt, 2012:469).

This is a reflective process, where, paradoxically, past and future are complex and dynamic in the context of an ever-changing present. Learning takes place as we explore uncertainties about the situations in which we find ourselves. If we take up the systems-based view of thinking and action being separate then there is challenge in how to glue them together again (Elkjaer, 2008). It has been argued that the most important contribution consultants can make is to try to stay radically open to what is coming up for the client, and to stay with this exploratory process for as long as possible (Wenzel, 2012). This enables the exploration of a multiplicity of narratives, constituting the differing perspectives of organisational reality as they arise, rather than the belief that these exist prior to conversation. This can open new ways for us to think and act in an increased sense of awareness. Siegel takes up similar ideas, suggesting that the idea of a linear time flow is a common way of representing experience. However:

> if there is only now, then being fully present in the moment includes not only feeling the sensory fullness of now, but also being open to whatever reflections arise on past nows, the fixed moments we've experienced and call 'past', and the open moments we can anticipate that await us when next becomes now, what we call the future (Siegel, 2016:72).

A view of the importance of clients bringing their own thoughts and experiences into conversation encourages the sharing of narratives that can be reviewed, challenged and disrupted. This suggests an argument for encouraging reflection and reflexivity that offers an opportunity to make greater sense of uncertainty and change (Mowles, 2015). Questions can be asked about whether established ways of working are still relevant, although this does not suggest that such questions are easy, or will be effective (ibid.).

What has become particularly resonant in thinking about the relational experience of advising has been the visceral sense of 'being let in' that I talked of in Chapter 2. I have come to explore this in relation to the concept of 'mind'. Mind is at the heart of social being, a position argued by Mead, and in more recent work by Siegel (2012, 2016). These authors argue for 'mind' arising within and between, at the same time, and put forward that in our conversation we are structuring our experience. I often come back to the question of what I mean when I say I am 'being let in': is this a trap? 'being let in' to what? In the same way, how can I state that something I have said or done in a client meeting has improved their business in some way? Once 'let in', what happens after I leave? How will the ideas or actions be taken up – if at all? This sense of doubt continually pervades my thinking. From a process perspective, making sense together is not possible if we understand action as an autonomous process. This has led to me becoming critical of the view of the transfer of knowledge from the adviser to the small-business client, as if knowledge can be held by one individual in a form that can be transferred to another. In taking up Mead and Siegel's understanding of 'mind', in which mind is relational and perpetually under construction, knowledge emerges in the here and now, informing how we come to understand change in each unique relationship.

Recently, I was at an event at which the speaker[6] was describing the difficulty of researching feelings and the sense of well-being. In describing the challenge, he suggested that we '*think of a butterfly, colourful, vibrant, flying around*' and then *'you catch it and pin it to a board ... what are you losing*?' This got me thinking. How do I understand this intuitive feeling that cannot be pinned down? Siegel talks about the importance of 'becoming aware of the external signals from another person and those being given off by the self' (Siegel, 2012:300) relating to the sense of 'feeling felt'. At times, exploring advising practice, saying something about the experience of 'being let in' or bringing about change, feels like that butterfly. Czarniawska (2016):618) suggests that in social research there is the opportunity for developing new metaphors for thinking, as for her they are as 'fragile as butterflies and may die soon'. 'Being

[6] (Prof. Peter Lovatt from the Univeristy of Hertfordshire, who writes about the psychology of dance)

let in' is a metaphor that enables me to express something that is difficult to articulate. Metaphors are enabling and constraining at the same time. Awareness of this means there is a need to challenge explanations which are seen as fixed moments in time that tell a particular story, pinned like the butterfly to a particular place and time. However, in making sense of intuition in this metaphorical way, I sense that in pinning it down I am losing its fluidity.

This continuous challenging of what is known is not without its challenges and its critics. Brannick and Coghlan (2006) suggest that reflection can become narcissistic if reflexivity is not instrumental. They go on to recommend a view of reflexivity that is a 'definite concrete form' (ibid:158) that increases theory construction. The assumption here is that we can choose to reflect or not, but this lacks a recognition of this activity as a human capacity. In response to this challenge, I find Dewey's (1938) view of 'inquiry' more resonant with the idea of 'experience'. Dewey made no distinction between reflection and reflexivity (Mowles, 2015), suggesting that this activity can help with learning how to act differently. It is not meant to uncover truths (like pinning down butterflies), but is a way of reducing doubt and restoring balance to a problematic situation (Kelemen and Rumens, 2008). The significance of stories and narratives therefore helps in understanding organisational activity, challenging researchers and practitioners to examine their own perspectives, both on activity (Boyce, 1996) and in their research (Warwick, 2010, Riessman, 2008, Pillow, 2003). This is where the reflection on conversation with Tom adds detail to this understanding.

Recognition of emergent social patterning - back to Industrial Wheel Co

Suddenly the door of the 'vacuum' opened, and a man of older but indeterminate age introduced himself as Tom. I followed him out of the lobby and into a dark hallway that led to his office. The setting was very old-fashioned and it seemed that walking through this lobby was like leaving the 21st century and preparing to go back to an earlier industrial age. Tom invited me to sit down, and asked if I would like a cup of tea. I agreed, and he phoned through the order, which the lady from behind the screen, introduced as Gwen, brought in a few minutes later, looking less fierce. Tom mentioned that he had heard that Business Link was able to help with business issues and this had prompted his call. Having spoken previously to him on the phone, I had some prior interaction, which made this meeting less challenging than the initial discussion with Peter.

In advising practice, I am particularly aware of a visceral 'felt intuition'. Walking through the door to meet someone new with whom one has no shared history and little understanding of the particular context requires a heightened awareness for the symbols that have shared meaning

for both adviser and client. Socialisation, from past experience of particular situations or artefacts, becomes available to individuals as 'significant symbols' in the present (Mead, 1934). Personal and social realities are 'constructed', rather than fixed like stories from the past. Symbols represent particular norms of business, which are formed and re-formed in the moment of relating, and in this process a sense of identity, and difference, emerges. Goffman (1983:7) suggests that we are all susceptible to participation in the rituals and routines to which we are socialised. I recognise these as the social patterning of 'hellos', handshakes and business cards that are played out at the start of business meetings, facilitating the rapport-building process from which conversation can go on.

In paying attention to these socialised processes there is a resonance with Mead's concept of 'social object' (Griffin and Stacey, 2005, Mead, 1912) that suggests more than a physical object. The tendency to act requires an understanding of the participation of both the 'self' and 'other' for the act to be fulfilled. For example, in the exchanging of business cards, or an invitation to tea drinking, there is a socialised understanding which enables activities to take place without prior discussion. These mutually recognised processes make relationship building possible, negotiating a shift towards a sense of 'we' from which the meeting can go on. This a co-created emotional connection within which trust can be developed (Nikolova et al., 2015). This interconnectedness of self and other is understood in the 'gesture and response' of ongoing processes where every gesture is connected to some previous gesture. Stacey (2001a) draws on this idea to explain how all relating has a historical context. Socialisation of the 'self' is what enables social objects to be recreated in local practice. Mead (1934) argued that mind and self are not biologically given but socially emergent. This introduction of a 'social' self is suggestive of Siegel's (2001) view of our sense of mind coming from within and between at the same time. Mead's theory of communication is a social theory of mind (Stacey, 2005b), proposing that it is through conversation that mind and self arise in the social act, and that how we act can never be understood as a purely subjective interpretation (Strong, 1939). Identity emerges intersubjectively rather than being present in an *a priori* fashion (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). The concept of identity, drawing on Siegel's argument of 'mind' being a social process, situates our understanding of self and other as being formed in a 'social act' (Mead, 1938). In adviser–client relationships, all participants reveal a sense of identity, enabling exploration of self in response to what are often simple questions.

This reminds me that the offering of tea is something that I always welcome. These social patterns enable something of a respectful welcome or invitation. The offering of a cup of tea is a universal sign of hospitality (Jolliffe, 2006). Tea drinking is a fairly predictable activity, and

it gives me time to settle in and attune to the surroundings. For this reason, I rarely say no. A wealth of information emerges in such a simple act. It allows both a sense of stability and opportunities for novelty and learning to arise: 'cups or mugs?' or 'who makes the tea?' Such occurrences can illuminate the relationship between manager and staff: does the manager ask someone else to bring it or do they go off to make it themselves? Involvement in this social process enables a gradual transition from polite introductions and invitations to drink tea towards a shift in conversation that opens up opportunities for exploration.

Relational awareness arising in a flow of 'nows'

My assumption was that Tom had always been part of these surroundings, in a similar way to how those around me at CasanCo had worked there for many years. At this time, I had only recently closed down a company that had striking similarities, even down to the old-fashioned style of the desks and the limited number of computers in evidence. As we sat and talked, Tom told me that he had only recently bought the company, and that he felt they needed to increase sales. I experienced a sense of despondency mixed with curiosity. My private response was of surprise, the thought of *'why would he would have found this dusty manufacturing environment one that was worth investing in?*' coming to mind. I did not ask this question explicitly, but instead enquired what 'industrial wheels' actually were, and what they did. Rather than explaining, Tom invited me out to the factory to see the manufacturing process first-hand.

As we walked from his office, crossing the corridor, I felt more relaxed. I recognised a familiar divide between the offices and the shop floor. CasanCo had been an export packing and freight forwarding company. Our main activity was manufacturing packing cases of all shapes and sizes, for shipping our client's goods around the world. Manufacture and packing was undertaken in a similar factory area to this, with administration and the freight arrangements taking place in the adjoining offices. The scene as we walked into the factory at Industrial Wheel Co called to mind walking out onto the factory shop floor at CasanCo. The environment was different, in that at CasanCo we had stacks of timber, wood saws and power nailers hammering packing cases together, overlaid by sounds of beeping and revving up, as forklift trucks loaded filled cases onto lorries or into containers. Here at Industrial Wheel Co, instead of wood, at one end of the factory there were piles of different grades of grit reaching up towards the high ceiling. I was intrigued by the set-up, and walking into the factory a picture of a salt mine came into my mind. This may sound ridiculous as I have never been in a salt mine, but the atmosphere was dark and industrious, with men at different stages of the manufacturing process working away. It was like stepping back in time.

The products being made were 'industrial wheels', which are used in engineering machinery. Tom talked me through the process, likening it to a high-precision recipe that was unique to each set of wheels produced. It was clear that these were highly skilled workers and engineers, working together to complete each wheel. The context here of bespoke products, developed together with clients, was similar to the way in which packing cases were made. Understanding the needs of individual clients required knowledge that had evolved over years. I had seen this as a blessing and a curse at CasanCo. In terms of switching costs for clients, there was a big upheaval if they wanted to source similar cases, perhaps from a cheaper supplier. The patterns and idiosyncrasies of production became implicit processes, a sort of 'practical wisdom' (Nonaka and Toyama, 2007), that could not easily be transferred from one individual to another. This meant a service could be provided that was of high value to clients, particularly given that some of the machinery being shipped could be worth up to a million pounds. It also meant that there was a lack of adaption, and a reluctance to try new ideas or to innovate.

Tom explained that the wheels would go through a process of mixing, pressing, balancing and baking, and that at each stage there would be one or two men stationed to undertake their tasks within this division of labour. He mentioned that the press they used to flatten the discs was the original from when the company was opened over fifty years before, and I surmised that in some ways these processes had not changed over that time. This was an intensive, highly skilled process, with most workers being in their late forties and older, and it struck me that they seemed to be of a similar age to those who had worked in the factory at CasanCo. I considered that it might be difficult to get younger workers to train up for the work carried out here, as this is what we had experienced at CasanCo. We occasionally filled a vacancy with a younger person, but very few wanted to do the manual work required, and most left after a few weeks. Once someone was trained they tended to stay, and this meant that the following generation was then missing from the team. This age and experience situation led to the development of close relationships that gave the shop floor a sense of community. Situations like this create a 'we' identity that Siegel identifies as occurring when:

> repeated experiences are often woven into a tale of our identity as we observe, witness, and narrate a story we've told over, and over, and over again about who we are. At least who we think we are (Siegel, 2016:140).

I noticed that some workers looked up to speak or acknowledge us, while others ignored us, creating a tension which I sensed as a silent form of protest. In thinking about this now, I have the sense that being taken round the shop floor increased the mutual anxiety and mistrust of

those being ‘observed’. Recognising the tensions between managers and the shop floor staff called to mind CasanCo. A sense of ‘them and us’ was often directed towards ‘the management’. Those working on the shop floor saw themselves as apart from management. Similarly, those in the office saw themselves as a distinct group, in the way that Elias discusses in terms of the relationship between the established and the outsiders (Elias and Scotson, 1994). As groups evolve, the sense of being an ‘insider’ in a particular community works as both an enabling and a constraining factor from which particular patterns of behaviours arise. This leads to tensions between groups, for example in negotiations regarding working overtime, shifting the power relations between office staff in one group and those on the shop floor in another. Bonus schemes have a similar self-organising effect, through which it could be identified that working patterns would respond to the evolving rules of a particular scheme without there being a specific blueprint for action. I found out later that there was just such a scheme at Industrial Wheel Co. These different ‘we’ identities are inseparable from ourselves as an ‘I’. I have talked about being an adviser, but in conversation with Tom, I was also mindful of what it felt like to be a fairly new managing director, with the attendant tensions and anxieties of working within complex and dynamic relationships.

Understanding power as shifting in a continually negotiated tension reflects something of the ‘master–slave’ dynamic that Hegel talked of as a paradoxical relationship of independence and dependence (Hegel et al., 1977). Hegel’s view of experience as being perpetually constructed suggests that a sense of identity is not held in the self as an essential quality, but in how an individual ‘sees its own self’ in others’ views of the self in the dialectic process. I can relate to this in terms of the tensions of office and factory dynamics and of stepping into a role of increased responsibility. Hegel suggests that:

> self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged (Hegel et al., 1977:111).

As I read this it brings to mind something of what I am talking about when I say I am ‘being let in’. To be ‘an adviser’ or ‘a consultant’ (or indeed a manager, mentor or coach) you have to be recognised as that by others, which will influence how you then act within the situation. I think that there are similarities here with how Hjalmarsson and Johansson (2003) talk of the ‘clientification’ process. These roles are not fixed categories, but are constructed, and reconstructed as we interact, and this sense of recognition is critical for the client–adviser relationship to evolve. With Tom, and with Peter (Chapter 2) and Frank (Chapter 3), I also

gained a greater sense of self from their openness to continue the advising relationship over a number of further meetings.

Exploring advising as holding space for sustaining reflective conversation

Walking back into the office from the factory with Tom, my mind was full of questions, none of them about marketing. Siegel (2016) suggests the stories we tell, revealing memories and meanings, are core mental processes. I wondered about the challenges that Tom was facing, as a new owner of such an old and well-established company. Going into the factory brought out feelings for me of the struggles at CasanCo. Back in his office, I asked him about his experience since taking on the company, and it was like opening a floodgate. Responding to my question, Tom confided his concerns about his lack of knowledge of the manufacturing process, and said that he felt over-reliant on others.

The commonalities apparent between CasanCo and the situation with Tom provide an example of what I mean when I talk of advising taking place as temporal. We were caught up in discussions that reflected organisational experiences in which 'workers, machines, managers are entangled phenomena, relational beings that share more than the air around them; they help constitute one another' (Barad, 2007:239). What particularly resonates with me here is that Barad goes on to say:

> The entangled, contingent, and changing material conditions of the shop floor produce much more than saleable commodities, and the flow of capital is but one stream in a turbulent river of agencies (Barad, 2007:239).

This suggests that the dynamic interconnectedness of local interaction means there can never be a direct cause-and-effect explanation – or solution.

The ethnographic study by Orr (1986) reflecting on the work of Xerox engineers is a powerful example of what happens in practice. He talks of the story-telling nature of the problem solving used in maintaining and mending the machines. This is similar to the narrative of IBM (Chapter 2), in which the narrative structure of sharing relevant and contextual stories enables new insights on problems to emerge as we explore experience together. In these two corporate examples, the former is more about success, whereas the latter takes up themes of failure. These narratives are different from research which has been 'cleaned of all the vagueness, slipperiness, contradiction, ambivalence and unpredictability of engagement of the complex contexts under study (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009:663). In his book *Talking About Machines,* Orr (1987) describes the improvisory relationships between technicians, customers

and machines. As a researcher, rather than being one of the technicians, Orr might be seen as taking an outsider perspective on his writing. However, ten years after he wrote the book he reflected on the context of the research (Orr, 2006), and on how his history of being a technician in the army led him to explore similar practices displayed by individuals, rather than taking a more usual, organisational approach to the research. This again shows that history matters.

Above I mentioned how undertaking tasks over many years brings a sense of repetition, from which arises a form of practical wisdom. This intuitive response to everyday actions may seem effortless, but it can take years of implicit learning for it to evolve (Kets de Vries, 2009). Before working at CasanCo, I taught dance. Managing classes of students was responsive and intuitive, and I had therefore found it hard to get to grips with the environment of packing and freight forwarding activities into which my prior experience did not fit. Tom's background was in managing large catering firms, a very different context to the manufacturing environment that we had just walked around. Tom's frustration brought my own experience to mind. I had also been reliant on others around me doing their jobs, and I saw how they were blaming each other in our struggle with diminishing sales and reducing profits. Industrial Wheel Co was facing a similar situation to CasanCo, in that its main customer base was declining because of shifts in global supply chains. Tom and I talked about the tensions on the shop floor, and about the decline of the manufacturing industry in the UK and its impact on sales. This had been one of the reasons that I had become involved with Business Link when working at CasanCo: to try to find some answers. This had also been one of the reasons Tom had called an adviser in: to find ways of increasing marketing activities to increase sales. A question remains for me here about the choices one makes as an adviser: what were my responsibilities to deliver on what had been requested? In encouraging exploration we discussed areas that would help him to grasp more of what was going on in the company, and which could lead to greater confidence informing his view of marketing for the company. Miller (2004) suggests that it is in this holding of space that we can work on issues together. Although she relates her thoughts to teaching situations, working in this way in advising can reduce the tendency to act in an advice-giving way. The exploration was sustained over a period of four years as we continued to meet and discuss the evolving business situation and new ways of working.

Paying attention to tendencies to respond to past experience, rather than to what is coming up in the present, requires a reflective way of working, which is not always easy to achieve when caught up in the emotions of the moment. As Orr explains above, we can never separate our 'self' from the situations we are experiencing in the present, however we can remain aware, staying curious about who we are, and how our 'self' influences how we are responding to

others. The concept of 'transference' (Grant and Crawley, 2002), describing the redirection of feelings about a past situation to a current one, was discussed in Chapter 3. In writing about the similarities between CasanCo and Industrial Wheel Co there is a risk that, because there may be similar patterns, there might be a tendency to transfer ideas directly between different contexts. The danger is that seeing similarities might lead to prescriptions; however, remaining mindful of these similarities can often lead to relevant and challenging questions that may have been overlooked by someone without particular experience.

Conversation about trends in UK manufacturing with Tom explored shifts affecting him that I recognised from CasanCo. In a later conversation with Peter (Chapter 2), I found out that the 'successful' company I had visited had originally had a £500 million turnover, but that this had reduced to £16 million for similar reasons. These broader themes that influence our local experience are often overlooked. Following on from the idea of transference, for some consultants there can be a fragility when they bring issues of self-esteem into the relationship (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). My experience of CasanCo felt for a long time as if it had been my fault, in terms of my inability to recognise fundamental problems and to think of solutions, and this had haunted me long after I made the decision to close the company. Exploring narratives, I have become more aware of the dynamic and situated experience of practice that was initially unexamined when I started this research. Seeing how others were dealing with similar challenges I gradually became less angry with myself and my situation. Complexity ideas gave me a growing sense of relief, in recognising that there were aspects over which I had had no control. This learning has influenced my practice, allowing it to evolve into an exploratory, conversational approach encouraging others to challenge perceptions and to bring alternative views to the discussion.

Nikolova et al. (2009:296) talk of 'reflective conversations' in describing an approach that can help consultants and advisers engage with their clients in cooperative learning for generating solutions to problems. However, in taking a reflexive approach, I am forming my understanding of practice as 'sustaining reflective conversation', where meaning arises in and between the adviser and client. There is a distinction between Nikolova et al. (ibid.) and their focus on 'conversations', in the plural, and how I am taking up this idea. I argue for a focus on 'sustaining reflective conversation', in the singular form, as a process that holds space for more exploratory and open enquiry. It is in conversation that similarities and differences emerge, and although each situation is unique, it is possible for similar situations to become themes for further dialogue. While awareness of business problems and other issues will be discussed, I also

recognise that these can evolve and transform, providing deeper meaning and alternative perspectives for adviser and client to consider.

Summary of key ideas

In this exploration of practice, I have shown that drawing on narrative can bring insights to research on organisational contexts, and on business advising in particular. I have paid attention to this as a social process that has correspondence with Dewey's idea of 'inquiry', in which working with the client responsively establishes exploration, rather than solutions, as the intention of advising activity. Rather than being an abstract process removed from the unpredictability of our engagements with the complex contexts under study (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009), I am suggesting that this is a process of sustaining reflective conversation. This perspective retains context, history and non-linearity, and reflects more of the bodily experience of working with others (Stacey, 2005a, Burkitt, 2012, Simpson, 2009, Siegel, 2001). This emergent understanding reflects the complexity of grasping at meanings that change during the process of engaging thoughtfully (Doyle, 2013). The recognition that each client situation is unique and yet resonant with prior experience is further explored in the following chapter, in which I discuss how the evolution of knowledge arises in our practical engagement with others.

Chapter 6 Exploring everyday experience of business advising - dogs, falcons and detective stories

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that models suggesting a transferring of knowledge in adviser–client relationships sustain an unhelpful separation between situated exploratory local interaction and problem-solving and planning processes. This has been recognised in critical studies that challenge consulting models in relation to large firms (Nikolova et al., 2009, Alvesson et al., 2009). However, there is little discussion of this relationship in the literature of government-funded advising or in the context of small-business clients. More commonly, advising literature takes an abstract view, situating advising as an autonomous practice in which the adviser chooses the approach, remaining unchanged by experience. Exploring advising as social, exploratory and responsive suggests that 'personal–practical knowledge' (Ghaye, 2000) – practical wisdom or 'phronesis' (Flinn and Mowles, 2014, Flyvbjerg, 2005) – evolves as we work with others. Drawing here on narratives of client meetings, I am paying attention to the diversity of advising experience to bring about deeper insight into the organisational context of small firms. I argue that the practice of encouraging reflective conversation opens space for exploring different perspectives, in which learning and potentially transformational change can arise for adviser and client.

Exploring advising ideology – searching for solutions or just muddling through?

Much of the literature about consulting and advising relates to large and corporate firms (see for example Alvesson and Johansson, 2002, Bäcklund and Werr, 2008, Biech, 2011, Ernst and Kieser, 2002, Pemer and Werr, 2013). However, an argument has been made for small organisations using different decision-making processes to larger companies, putting an almost mystical slant on entrepreneurs who 'think' differently to managers in large firms (Busenitz and Barney, 1997). What is apparent in the research on business support for small firms is that it focuses almost exclusively on growth-related problems and barriers (Atherton et al., 2010), as informed by the management discourse on building capacity for growth (Wiklund et al., 2009). This feeds into the discourse around increasing potential economic contribution which is continually revisited in the evaluation of government-funded support (BERR, 2008, Lee, 2014).

In relation to support for owners and managers of small businesses, it has been suggested that flexible, relationship-based advice is something that they respond to (Mughan et al., 2004); however, there is uncertainty about what this type of advice might look like in practice. In the

business strategy literature related to small firms, Ebben and Johnson (2005) explore the tension between strategy that enables flexibility, and that which enables efficiency, suggesting that these outcomes can be pursued separately to enable appropriate choice and to avoid mixing strategies. Other views of advising echo these choices, adding other dilemmas, such as Mole (2000) suggestion that advisers decide whether to focus on growth or survival when working with clients. Regardless of which of these approaches is followed, most of the literature focuses on diagnostic methods, suggesting the importance for those giving advice of reaching his or her own conclusion regarding the problem and the solution that should be pursued (Kubr, 2002). This puts the onus of choice on the adviser, with little consideration of the particular circumstances of the client, an issue that has been noted in the wider consultancy literature (Alvesson et al., 2009). Thus the general view offers little explanation of how the client–adviser relationship arises as a social practice (Nikolova et al., 2009), or recognition that the client and adviser will be changed in some way by the process (Palmer-Woodward, 2007).

In addressing this lack of discussion on client–adviser relationships, there is a suggestion that reflection should become part of practice that represents an ideal relationship:

> An ideal consulting relationship brings about not only answers to the practical questions of managers but also enhances reflective practice; adopting new ways of thinking and acting which help managers to anticipate and solve similar problems in the future (Puutio et al., 2009:513).

This inclusion of reflective thinking is a small step towards recognising this as a social process, although the suggestion above is consigned to the client alone. However, I argue that these are not separate activities, as suggested above, but that they take place simultaneously in a conversational flow. Shaw's view of practice takes a different perspective:

> I have come to recognise that varied, expressive, spontaneous speech is crucial, that it is often the act of saying, or of speech-entwined action, at critical moments that moves the sense making of human beings (Shaw, 2015:394).

Exploring advising as a conversational sense-making process, I recognise that the richness of reflective conversation continues to be a source of learning that influences and informs my practice.

I have identified the challenges and rewards of moving from stranger to confidante (Chapter 4) in the short time that is available to an adviser to build trust and rapport. When working with

clients, my practice has evolved to encourage the sharing of narratives, often in the form of stories about the business, which encourages reflective conversation. Each business has its own history that often remains largely unexamined in the flux and flow of everyday business activities. In taking a narrative approach, sharing stories involves all participants in a reflective sense-making process that can lead to deeper insights into what might be going on for the client. This forms a common thread in each of the narratives here. My curiosity about the local context of the client, and the opening up of the negotiated experience of exploring next steps together, would often come from a simple first statement such as '*tell me about your business…*' used to get a sense of what was going on for them. The response to this question could never be predicted, and it also calls out thoughts and feelings for me of making sense of the situation, helping to find a way to go on together in the conversational process. Gartner (2007:614) suggests that:

> Stories are never complete, in and of themselves. Stories are told in a particular context, to particular listeners, by a particular storyteller, for particular purposes.

These opening discussions also enable the airing of expectations of the advising relationship early on, which can help to reduce misconceptions around what might be achieved (Nikolova et al., 2009).

It has been suggested that learning is likely to be more informal in small firms than in larger firms (Higgins, 2011), and I found that it was not unusual, as had been my own experience prior to my degree, for many small-firm managers to lack exposure to formal business theory. It was only as part of my OU degree that I was introduced to management concepts, and these did offer a broader understanding of business issues. However, I became aware of how easy it is to fall into ways of talking that reify these approaches, when, in my early days of advising, I asked a client about his 'marketing strategy'. He replied '*I wouldn't know a marketing strategy if it hit me in the face!*' It was a lesson for me, and I was wary after that of making assumptions about the value of formulaic questions that took a judgemental view of what an 'ideal' business owner or manager should be doing.

When I began reading the journals, I found some evidence of formal practices for managing information which had been helpful in increasing my business awareness:

> *Cash flow has been a worry but my cash flow sheet is the best thing that I have implemented – at least I am totally aware of what is coming and going each week/day.*

> *It is very reassuring in times of trouble and gives me leverage on sale/debtors/purchases etc…*[7]

However, this was countered by examples of the ideas of others becoming generalised prescriptions, with the solutions offered by Jonathan holding the promise to bring about the change that I was looking for. I notice the responsibility I put on him in one entry:

> *I am looking forward to my interaction with Jonathan over the next few months. I have faith in his ability to focus on what is important to get us back on track.* [8]

I think this illustrates how easy it is for consultants, and leaders more generally, to become drawn into making transformative promises that they are not in a position to keep, and this is an issue largely overlooked in the mainstream literature. It is something that Mowles (2012) talks of in relation to consultancy as 'temporary leadership'. I understand that this relational dynamic was at work between Jonathan and me, something which we never questioned at the time. It is important to recognise that in working in conditions of uncertainty there will always be unintended consequences which cannot be predicted, and that these consequences might be wanted or unwanted. This will mean that, despite good intentions, there are no guarantees for the outcomes of advice. I have experienced a bodily sense of discomfort when working with clients when the expectation arises that I can offer a solution for their problem. As my experience as an adviser evolved over time I became less open to getting caught up in these manipulative situations, and this increased my interest in sustaining the open conversation that I am arguing for in this thesis.

I have found it difficult to break away from the language of bounded systems which permeates management theory. When management writers such as Collinson and Jay (2012) draw on complexity ideas, they often suggest instrumentally that organisations are 'things' that need to be simplified. The journal entries reflect a series of moments in time that I am able to access in the present – I read about spreadsheets and cash flows, and lots of emotions, but there is little evidence of some 'thing' that I could call 'an organisation' that existed outside of these activities and feelings. As Mowles (2011:86) argues, the ongoing practices existing between engaged, interdependent people are not separate from the organisation: they form the way the organisation 'becomes'. As an adviser, I am caught up in these practices, and encouraging

[7] 01/11/01 Dk turquoise book

[8] 25/10/01 Dk turquoise book

reflective conversation enables an exploration of how individuals are making sense together, narrating their understanding of organisation.

The messiness of uncertainty has led me to challenge literature that metaphorically brushes complexity under the carpet and thus displays a lack of understanding of the paradoxical tension of stability and instability that is the everyday experience of organisational life. In working with several hundred clients over seven years at Business Link, experience suggested something different. There were simultaneously uniquenesses and commonalities in all client situations. The experience of CasanCo and other organisations that I was working with showed me that, on a daily basis, individuals were working together, and that there were many formal systems and processes in place. However, in responding to what was coming up in the living present I recognise that everyday interactions with others reflected what Lindblom (2010) calls 'the science of muddling through'. This view more closely reflects the experience of what small firms were about for me.

Working with the art of conversation – the challenge of family dynamics at TNN

Experience of working with clients has taught me how important it is to sense, listen and respond to what is coming up in the moment, and to become more comfortable with the sense of being 'at home in the midst of events' (Shaw, 2015:391). It strikes me that, in my experiencing of advising, I am encountering something similar to Shaw's (2011) view of leadership practice as opening space for reflective enquiry. It is a way of paying attention to how individuals are enabled and constrained by their interrelationships with others. In one situation, Gerald, the owner of a family business, called Business Link to explore working with an adviser. On the phone, he specifically asked about my background, which did not often happen prior to a client visit. My feeling was that he wanted to check me out, and this put some pressure on me to make a good impression over the phone. I had begun working part-time at UH at this time, and with my most confident tone I told him that I had run my own business, worked with small firms for seven years, and was currently also working part-time as a senior lecturer at UH, teaching business strategy. This seemed to satisfy him and he agreed to meet with me.

A few days later, I arrived at the premises of The Natural Nursery (TNN). As I drove in, I passed a small wooden building selling gifts and plants that had been grown on the premises. I went in and said I was there to meet with Gerald Wiseman. The woman behind the counter gestured in the direction of one of the large greenhouses, '*He's in the glasshouse over there*'. I felt uncomfortable. I walked out of the shop and over to the first of several large glasshouses.

On opening the door, I realised that this was a virtually empty space with just a few groups of plants clustered together on the ground. There was something strange about this, and later I found out that all the other glasshouses were disused and empty. Inside this glasshouse, in the far corner, was a small shed. There was also a large black Labrador, which bounded up and started licking me enthusiastically; I pushed it away as Gerald came over to introduce himself.

Gerald launched into a whole history of the company and at some point he suggested that we go to the 'office', which turned out to be the shed in the corner. However, he did not move towards the shed, and despite my pushing the dog away it continued to lick my trousers as we stood there. Gerald seemed not to notice, and did nothing to acknowledge the dog issue while continuing with his monologue. As we stood and talked, Gerald's daughter Julia, (from the shop) walked by us. I had sensed tension in our first exchange and she remained aloof. Julia did at least attempt to pull the dog away before going to the office/shed. We followed her in, and she was sitting down at the desk, although she did not join in the conversation. I sensed I was caught up in family tensions, but with no prior knowledge of the history of this difficult situation, I was uncertain about how to go on.

The tensions of family businesses are well documented, and one of the themes that came out of Aram and Noble's (1998) study was that family relationships and family dynamics were often not acknowledged. This lack of recognition of family tensions is not unique (Hoover and Hoover, 2013). The Institute for Family Businesses states that over two thirds of all UK SMEs are family businesses. This fact is not well known, and many business owners do not recognise that they fall into this category. In support of this observation from my own experience, I know that we never discussed CasanCo as a 'family' business, and yet when I started work there, Roy's stepbrother, brother-in-law and nephew were all working for the company. I had further experience while at Business Link of running the 'Family Business Programme', a government-funded project to encourage increased awareness of succession planning. Despite these statistics, I wonder how much difference it makes to advising if the business is thought of as a family firm. In thinking of the interdependence of individuals, organisational dynamics may be different when one is relying on family members rather than on employees who might remain more emotionally detached. There is no formulaic answer, as many clients would fall into this general categorisation. It has been noted that emotional ties in families can be an advantage in working together, however research has highlighted that the tensions between family members and transitions from one generation to another can be particularly challenging (Benavides-Velasco et al., 2013).

At TNN, Gerald sat down on the office chair, leaving me a plastic garden chair to sit on. We continued to talk, with his daughter sitting a few feet away. I knew that she was listening, but she was not taking an active part in the discussion. Gerald continued to talk about the business, telling me how his daughter runs the shop, which was 'taking off'. He then explained that all employees were family members, and that his daughter-in-law was now part of the team. Responding to a comment Gerald made about how he *'cared about the future of the business'*, Julia jumped into the discussion, interrupting him pointedly: '*We all do!*' As she found her voice, her frustration boiled over, challenging much of what her father had said. Sitting with the father and daughter, I was reminded of another adviser who had been in a similar situation. He had told a tale about a situation in which the family turned against him as he had 'tried to help them sort out their issues'. Collins (2004) notes that consultants as temporary collaborators often find themselves in curious and unenviable situations of this kind. This played on my mind as I worked to keep the thread of conversation going. Elias and Scotson (1994) talk of their experience of power relating in locally situated contexts in their study of the established and the outsiders. Similarly, Lundquist Coey (2016) talks of her practice as a consultant and how this often results in uncomfortable conversation such as I was feeling in this meeting. I was caught up in family tensions and aware of the unpredictable shifting relations of power. I tried to engage Julia further in conversation, but she was reticent. Perhaps this reticence was because, in this situation, I was seen as the outsider her father had brought in to 'sort them out'.

To my surprise, Gerald's daughter-in-law came into the shed to join us. She asked if I would like a cup of tea and went off, coming back with the tea a short while later. On reflection, I wonder now if she used the time to pass back information to other family members, as shortly afterwards Gerald's wife appeared. I felt a sense of pressure, having four out of the five family members' eyes on me, and the dog now lying at my feet. In the developing situation at TNN there was so much being shared and not shared at the same time. At one point, Gerald's wife excused herself to '*go off to deliver plants*' but their daughter-in-law remained, and then suddenly his son put his head round the door asking his wife '*can I borrow you for a minute*?' She went outside. A few minutes later, she returned taking her place at my side again. Despite these comings and goings, the conversation continued, with Gerald and Julia telling me more about the business.

In her suggestion about paying attention to 'conversation as an art', Shaw's (2011) discussion on leadership has a particular resonance with how I have come to reflect on this situation. She explores the practices involved in this process, such as having the courage and skill to invite and sustain open-ended and free-flowing conversation. Her suggestion is that this practice

'engages, opens up, and shifts the conversational life of an organisation', making me think of how, staying with this questioning process with the family despite my discomfort, concerns began to be aired. I cannot claim that what I was doing was consciously working with conversation; I was responding to what was coming up in this tense situation as I was trying to find a way to go on. The conversation was strained, with Gerald doing most of the talking, giving him the chance to tell the story from his perspective. Others have recognised this opportunity as being important:

> Narratives are critical to understanding the chapters of 'letting go' because they reveal the owners' authored contexts including their dreams of business creation, the challenges of business growth and evolution, and how they handle both such that they ultimately can or cannot let go (Solomon et al., 2011:151).

Gerald explained that originally TNN had grown vegetable plants for a large supermarket chain, investing heavily in the glasshouses. This contract was terminated unexpectedly, leaving them with high costs and few alternative sources of income. I began to see how this was part of the family anxiety that had not been discussed explicitly. The discussion shifted to the shop and Julia said turnover had doubled in the past year, and she believed that there was scope to make it much bigger. Gerald took over again, talking about it as '*Julia's shop'* and '*Julia's ideas'* and I could see that she was getting upset. Julia responded: *'If the money was being paid into my bank account you could call it my business but it isn't. I know it's my idea but the money goes into the company accounts and we all benefit.'* Julia's outburst changed the energy of the discussion. Hytti et al. (2017:681) suggest that:

> Doing gender and family business calls for managing the 'shadow negotiations' in dealing with the unspoken attitudes, hidden assumptions, stereotypes, power relations and expectations both from within the family (business) and from external stakeholders.

She had expressed her frustration, perhaps reflecting the challenges many daughters face in becoming more prominent in the business succession, particularly in relation to identity and being seen to step up to take a lead.

As we continued to talk, Julia's frustration became an opportunity for the family to discuss things that had probably not been discussed openly before. Hytti et al. (2017) argue there is a need to investigate how gender is negotiated and renegotiated in the daily operations of a family

firm in establishing authority, as roles and responsibilities change. When I think of Julia's interjection, experience at CasanCo is called out, in that I did not feel that as a woman I was being taken seriously, or that I had a voice in the male-dominated environment. It had not been my intention to encourage such open and emotional conversation at TNN, however hearing Julia finding her voice may have influenced why I worked to keep the discussion open, despite feeling under pressure at the time.

I realise that just by being present in this situation I was a co-creator of this tension. Stacey (2005b) draws on Foulkes, who talked of 'free-floating conversation' as having the potential to transform our relations with others. I asked a question out loud that had arisen in my silent conversation: '*Do you have family meetings to talk about the business*?'

Gerald told me confidently that they had regular meetings. I heard a sharp intake of breath from Julia: *'Let's be honest, Dad, we do talk, but not about the business. It always ends up with someone walking away from the table'*. She continued, *'It is difficult, people think they are being criticised and they take umbrage. Even when we try to find ways of discussing things it becomes too personal and we don't get anywhere'*. She added, '*You see, my father is a dreamer; I am a realist and I am concerned about what happens now'*.

Gerald cut in: 'But you have to have dreams…' and he began telling me the story of how he started his business with '*a 6 x 6 greenhouse with his mother 54 years ago'*.

'*But that was then, Dad, things have changed*' responded Julia.

Gerald's response began by giving Julia some credit, and then he dismissed her, trampling on her feelings and saying to me: '*A business needs a leader – you see, she is the captain, she does a good job ... but I am the Admiral*!'

The intensity of Gerald's analogy, positioning himself as the last stronghold of the business, reflected the dynamics of the family tensions. I sensed that his identity was potentially threatened by recent changes. He had years of experience and knowledge which in a way was being eroded, very similar to how James Starling was experiencing the introduction of computers at CasanCo (Chapter 4), and I imagined that because he saw his own position in the business declining Julia's idea blossoming was difficult for him.

Sometime later, as the meeting came to a close, I realised that I had been there for over two hours. I drove back to the office feeling exhausted. Even writing about this now I feel the tension of responding to the twists and turns of the conversation. When Mowles (2017b) talks of research undertaken in groups, he discusses the requirement for members of the group to

have some training in group analytics. At TNN, I felt somewhat out of my depth at times, having no prior experience of dealing with such an emotionally charged situation. Thankfully, we somehow stayed within the reflective process and the conflict did not spill over into something that I was unable to cope with. It is in making sense of meetings that I am faced with the challenge of how to sum up what has been discussed and to reflect something that meets the expectations of the formal role of the adviser contained within the Business Link systems. This disconnection between lived experience and a more codified version of events gives me an opportunity to understand the different aspects of the advising role. In the Business Link induction process, before taking up the adviser role the main focus of training was on contractual obligations and connections to policy decisions on appropriate support for 'small firms'. This focus was also linked to training on the systems used for monitoring purposes. There was little discussion about the practical engagement that elicited these outputs; this was for advisers to work out as they went along.

At TNN, there was so much that had happened in the meeting that could not be put into a simple action plan. As a way of offering further support, I mentioned at the end of the meeting with them my involvement in the Family Business Programme. I shared that the results of recent research had highlighted the challenges of succession planning, and I asked Gerald about how he saw this issue. I wonder now what his daughter and daughter-in-law were thinking as he acknowledged that, as the elder of the family, he wanted to hand it over to his two children. I suggested that I could find a specialist who could discuss succession planning with them. The family members agreed that this would be useful. Just before I left Julia asked me, '*As you have experience of family businesses ... are we the worst that you have seen*?' which made me laugh.

'Y*ou all seem quite normal to me; this is very typical of family businesses'*.

She laughed: '*that has made me feel better'*.

I arranged for them to have access to a succession-planning specialist. This sounds like a tidy end to the narrative, but the family's story would go on, and because it is not always possible to follow up with clients, I have no way of knowing how this meeting influenced what happened over time for them and the business.

Unpredictability in advising practice

I am arguing that every client meeting reflects a similar paradoxical tension of similarity and difference to those I encountered at TNN. Responding to these situations develops practice and the exploration of new ways to act with a sense of practical wisdom in the present. In contrast

to the meeting with TNN, not all client meetings lead to open exploratory conversation. One particular client meeting left me feeling extremely uncomfortable. I arrived at a meeting set up by the marketing team and Mike, the managing director of PF Electrical, invited me to see the production team assembling electrical components in the factory. He escorted me around and then invited me upstairs to his office. For over an hour, he went through every detail of the business, ignoring any questions or interjection I made in an attempt to gain his attention and break into his monological flow. Something about this meeting created a sense of deep unease. Higgins et al. (2013a) talk of how owner/managers can struggle with issues of control where their idea of management is telling subordinates what to do. This overlooks the inherent creativity that individuals can display in their roles. With Mike, it seemed he was keen to communicate his ability to maintain individual control over how the business was managed. Noble (1999) talks of how the prevalence of monitoring and control in management theory can lead to the illusion of always being in control, and the future being predicted and predictable. She contrasts this with improvisation, in music as well as management, which offers a more responsive approach to the spontaneity of business. With Mike, there seemed no spontaneity in what seemed similar to a well-rehearsed script. Eventually the stream of information ended, and I was at a loss as to what to say next, as I felt so stifled by his controlling approach. I started with an inane affirmative comment, saying that I felt that the systems in place were very comprehensive. He looked disappointed, saying that he was hoping that I would 'find something' he could put right.

I had a sense of being drawn into a manipulative situation, and so I tried to shift the discussion from further talk of systems and processes. I asked him what he saw as being the barriers to him improving the business. He told me that the company was the UK arm of a European company and that he was the only salaried employee. He said that this gave little incentive for him to do any more to grow the business, as all additional profits would go to the parent company. This disinterest served to close down the exploratory process, and I felt that there was little that I could contribute. As the company was not technically a UK SME, but rather an offshoot of a larger European company, there was little that Business Link could offer him. I wanted to extricate myself from the discussion; however, I asked a question that came from a sense of curiosity: '*As it seems that the business is running without any significant problems, what about you? How do you see your future?'*

He was initially taken aback, and I wondered if I had perhaps offended him by asking such a direct question. He explained that he had a wife and family, was earning good money, and he supposed that he would stay on for the time being. He was proud that this was the 'flagship'

company, and that his advice was sought across the group. He felt valued and he did not have any concerns about his ability to continue in the same way for the foreseeable future. This response seemed unsatisfactory to me and I repeated the question in a different form: '*I can see that the business is doing OK and that if there were a problem you would spot it a mile off with all these processes in place, but what do you see ahead for you?'* He did not answer immediately, seeming deep in thought. When he responded, he confessed '*Actually I am bored*!' In this admission, I unexpectedly experienced the shift to a sense of 'being let in'. Dalal (2014) suggests that the intimacy of a one-to-one conversation can bring out emotional mutuality, and that this can have a challenging aspect. In moving to a more open way of speaking, things shared can become less inhibited, in a way that is uncomfortable to hear. This is a different dimension of 'being let in' to the openness from where a meeting might take off and conversation become more engaged. As Mike became more animated he spoke with a different level of intensity to when talking of the business's processes, and another 'world' emerged. Mike's views on a number of things became increasingly unsettling. He enthusiastically showed me that he had CCTV trained on each of the workbenches downstairs, flicking though screens to show me how easily he could check on what staff were doing. Then he showed me another CCTV image trained on the car park, where he had a falcon tethered to a post. It is the 'dynamic nature of life and human relationships' that leads to the process of achieving an emerging sense of identity (Siegel, 2012:88). Pointing out of the window, Mike mentioned '*I take him out hunting in those woods over there in my lunch break*'.

Exploring advising as temporary leadership

I was glad to get away from the meeting, and I felt able to leave without an intention to arrange a follow up. As this was not formally a 'small business' there was no problem for me in choosing not to build a continuing relationship. Perhaps this is an enabling factor of advice that is free at the point of delivery. My actions may have been different had I been in a contractual relationship, in which my choice might have been tied into different considerations of reputation or securing income streams. I am aware of how Mike's way of working made me feel uncomfortable and this encouraged me to take a stand and challenge him to respond more genuinely. However, I could not anticipate what this would reveal. Being open to reflect on my practice has made personal choices of action more explicit, and pays attention to responsibility and ethical considerations. Encouraging conversation that is more open has led to the idea of temporary leadership becoming more important. Mowles relates this to consulting practice:

> Part of the process of being recognised by others involves consultants recognising themselves as leaders and practitioners. In taking their

> experience seriously their aim is to deepen their understanding of their own practice in pursuit of being clearer about what it involves and how it evolves, but also to grapple seriously with the ethical task of doing a good job for their contractors (Mowles, 2009:251).

Although this approach is related to the context of consulting, the ideas expressed reflect something of my own challenges in trying to do 'a good job' when working with my clients. It also points up the complexities of ethics in practice. Stacey (2005b) argues that we continually negotiate what is considered 'good' or 'bad' with each other, and such meanings differ from group to group, and change over time. Generally, there is little guidance about what constitutes ethical action, and it was never a discussion that I heard at Business Link.

In bringing these ideas together, there are particular client meetings that contrast with those of the 'Mike' type; I have come to see these as examples of where I had felt that I had been able to make a difference. There was one client meeting that struck me as an example of the interrelationships that come into play in a particular time and place, and which cannot be determined in advance. This example had a sense of being a drama and I wrote it up with a title, but I am aware that this is a post-rational view of the relationships that may make the experience seem more structured and organised than it actually was. It takes the form of a narrative with three parts, in which a number of threads of conversation came together.

The strange case of the adviser, the consultant, and the client's missing cash …

Part one – an introduction to interconnected interaction called networking

At Business Link some of our appointments were created through marketing initiatives, but I had found that these were often agreed to under sufferance by the client. Although they could be challenging, this challenge was useful in sharpening up my advising skills, as the meetings could often start as mildly hostile situations, resembling the first meeting with Peter. As a fairly new adviser finding my way around in the role, I realised that it was helpful to develop my own client meetings. I found that if I had made an appointment myself there could potentially be a more interesting and engaging conversation to be had than in marketing-arranged meetings. As well as having had a more engaged discussion in which the client was often more involved in the enquiry process (and possibly agreed to a follow up), I was also able to tick some boxes towards my objectives for the year.

One of these 'friendly' visits was to a client who had once been a supplier to CasanCo. Robin was a printer, and we had always got on well together. I made contact and he agreed to meet to

discuss his business. He enthusiastically talked about the value of 'networking', something I had not really been involved with before. He suggested that I come and talk about Business Link to a networking group he belonged to – the Herts and Essex Business Network (HEBN). As making contact with this type of business organisation was a requirement of my role I took up the offer – another box ticked – and he invited me as a guest to meet the group prior to my talk two weeks later.

Attending the group was informative and a good introduction to how formal networking worked. Meetings were held once a fortnight, only one profession would be represented, to give members exclusive 'leads' from other members, and all were required to stand and say a few words about their business each week. It was a friendly atmosphere and with Robin's support, I did not feel uncomfortable. I followed what others were doing and stood up to briefly introduce Business Link, sitting down relieved once my turn was over. A few turns on and a member stood up and introduced himself as a business consultant. In a thinly veiled way, I sensed that he was making a point that challenged my position as a purveyor of 'free' services that would impact on him acquiring potential clients. I made a mental note to myself: '*Look out for him when I present to the group in two weeks' time!*'

Two weeks later, I arrived armed with promotional literature about the services Business Link offered to clients. I had a presentation ('death by PowerPoint' pre-prepared by Business Link with a corporate branded set of slides), and after the initial meeting had taken place I stepped up to the front to present to about thirty business owners. I invited questions at the end. As suspected, the consultant I had noted stood up and challenged me. His exact words are long forgotten but the meaning remained – how could I justify taking away his potential clients with a free service? Surely, it could not be right that the government would allow such blatant use of funds to do him out of business! I had not planned a specific response, but I had anticipated that this might come up. Trying not to show my anxiety at being challenged in such an open forum, I replied that I did not see us as being in competition. Business Link was targeted to work with over 12,000 clients every year, and this constituted a very different type of service to the in-depth consultancy he offered to his clients. I went on to say something like: '*If we can discuss more about what you do then it is possible that you might be able to work with some of these Business Link clients'*. After the meeting, we had a longer chat. I liked the fact that he was willing to challenge, and to speak up for himself. I also felt that his challenge gave me a chance to show that I was not tasked with taking away business from consultants – there was another way, through possible future collaboration with a new model of 'brokerage' being introduced. Engaging in a conversational process rather than staying with my anxieties about

what might happen opened up opportunities for us to explore how we might work together in the future.

Part two – shifting the advising focus to brokerage

When I had first started at Business Link, the winds of change were blowing over the existing adviser team, many of whom considered themselves as 'consultants' with specialist skills which they would use as a way of generating commercial income. A government initiative had opened up these opportunities – it suggested that if advisers were worthy of it they would be able to generate ongoing client interventions that were paid for by the client, rather than just free at the point of delivery. Some took this more seriously than others, and Jonathan Reynolds, my adviser at CasanCo, was the highest-earning adviser for the duration of this initiative. When I became an adviser, I was employed to bridge a gap between consultancy and less-intensive advice, in a shift away from paid services. I was expected to 'diagnose' client needs, and initially to refer internally. I enjoyed the freedom of the role and I became a front-runner in the 'IDB' model – the acronym for the new initiative, standing for 'information, diagnostic and brokerage'. I had responsibility for referring externally to private-sector consultants. This developed opportunities for more dynamic and interconnected webs of relationships between private consultants and government-funded support.

The expectations that came with the role for an increased requirement for 'brokerage' meant identifying specialist support that could be recommended when required by clients (Forte, 2011). This came about partly because of private-sector complaints that Business Link was using public funds to compete with them, where closer working with independent advisers was being encouraged. As with all initiatives, this became something that was measured. The guidance related to expectations of the adviser to act as a 'broker' can be seen in the National Occupational Standards that were set up as general standards, and which placed a strong focus on the functional role of advisers. According to the standard we were expected to adhere to the Business Link brand, in which advisers were encouraged 'to tailor your approach to align with the client's goals and circumstances' (CFA, 2009:2). As with much of the advising literature, this suggests that the client holds the knowledge of the problem that the adviser is there to solve. I was aware of the tension between developing relationships and not being expected to be hands-on in terms of the take-up of support. This focus on brokerage might suggest that I was not there to offer business advice, but to identify problems for others to solve. However, in the brokerage model, in which the adviser shifts from being an 'expert' to someone who is facilitating support, my experience suggested an increased need for the ability to sustain exploratory conversation. On the one hand, there was a need to explore brokerage opportunities

with the client, while on the other there was a need to establish and maintain trust (Łobacz et al., 2016). This added increased complexity of handing over the client to a third-party supplier, which suggests a requirement to build strong supplier relationships too, such as the one that had arisen with Thomas.

On one particular day a client meeting had been put in my diary (rather than being self-generated), and I arrived at DJ Construction Contracts, a company that was situated in an old converted mill. The building was very impressive. I walked up to the first floor, which was large and open plan, with a number of desks set out around the ancient beams. My impression was that this was a high-value environment, but even in the first few minutes I also had a feeling of unease. It was so empty; I remember being greeted by the client, Mary Jones, and being taken into a room with a boardroom table and eight chairs that was separated from the open plan office. Around the walls were a number of signed photos of Arsenal footballers looking down at us.

Mary was very open and it did not take long to sense that she was really worried. She had been prompted to arrange the meeting because things were not going well. The business was focused on her husband David's skills as an installer of equipment in large construction projects. David was excellent at sales, with great skill in designing the installations for his team to carry out. Mary said that they had plenty of work, and yet financially things were not going so well. They had the expense of this large and prestigious office, but as we talked I found out about a brother-in-law who was being employed as a van driver, and a bookkeeper who would continuously put up her own hourly wage without any consultation (and was not challenged). Then in further discussion, she told me of a house in Spain, a house in the UK, several performance cars that were one of David's passions, along with his dedication to the football team. She told me they also had a one-year-old baby and an older child. It occurred to me that Mary was holding the fort on her own – there was no one else around. I was anxious (feeding off her anxiety), and I hoped that there would be something I could do to help sort things out. Drawing the meeting to a close I agreed we would have follow-up meeting that David would attend with Mary.

On arrival a few days later, I was warmly welcomed by Mary. I noticed that she seemed to have a problem with her eye – I asked her if she was OK and she said that the doctor had told her that the large amount of stress that she was under had affected the muscles in her face – it was almost like the effects of a stroke. I am aware of an emotional connection to Mary. I know that Mary's situation resonated with me. Siegel's (2001:78) work on interpersonal neurobiology discusses relationship formation as being 'a process of emotional communication achieved through collaboration, reflective dialogue and coherent narratives'. He goes on to talk of

'attunement' (Siegel, 2001:85). This term defines a process in which a sense of self arises in a shift towards a focus of 'self-with-attuned-other'. I felt a strong sense of connection to Mary and her situation. I was moved when she talked about how she hated leaving her baby to come into work, and that she felt so helpless in dealing with the problem.

I felt something of her sadness from my own challenges. Working at CasanCo I had experienced the challenges of dealing with personal trauma but at the same time feeling as if I was keeping everything going. Four months after I started work my sister had died, and with Roy's support we took on responsibility for her two boys, aged two and six. I became a mother of three overnight when they came to live with us and our daughter, who was four at the time. Four months after this my mother died, and a year later my father. This changed the dynamics of work for me, and I became more aware of the issues in the company, from which I had previously felt more detached. Problems took on a different meaning, focused on the realisation that, having three children, I would need a stable source of income. Roy was some years older than me, and heading towards retirement, and I had an increasing sense that things were becoming problematic. It had been difficult to find others at the company who would engage in discussions about what was becoming an increasing concern. I did not then have the experience of staying open to the anxieties of others when talking about uncertainty that I have now, and I found there was little appetite for open conversation. This was one of the reasons that I sought advice in the first place. It was also possibly the reason that the matter-of-fact approach of my Business Link adviser was particularly of interest to me at the time. Talking to Mary, I felt that there were few people who had stepped up to support me when I really needed help and this made me feel that I did not want to let her down.

At the time of the meeting with Mary, Business Link was providing a Business Performance Review Diagnostic (BPD) programme with funds available to pay for a consultant. For businesses that had the potential to grow this could be up to £5000. I suggested to Mary and David that we could go through this process to open up opportunities to review the business. From our conversation, I was well aware that Mary's issue did not fit with the 'growth' part of the criteria. Mead suggests a tension in which ethical choice can become a personality crisis, and Joas (in Ritzer and Smart, 2003) links this to a conflict emerging between personal values and those of the individuals we are directly involved with, or the generalised other. Values are an expression of free will (Stacey, 2005b), and I had to make a choice of action that was responsive to the situation we were discussing. Without support, I knew that it was likely the business's activities might not continue, which would be removing its future economic contribution; this would have been my justification for applying for the funding if I had been

challenged. However, in reflecting I can see that this choice was also related to my values of wanting to do the best I could for my client.

The BPD was a benchmarking exercise in which I had little confidence. Jaques and Povey (2007) research on benchmarking highlights a particular benefit, in that the diagnostic process enables a conversation that is more strategically focused, exploring a range of ideas for future activity. However, the haphazard way that data from heterogeneous small businesses was being uploaded to the database meant there was little meaningful information coming out, other than some general trends, which I felt rendered the process almost useless for clients. Jaques and Povey (ibid.) conclude, however, that advisers who are less positive about benchmarking (and I consider myself to be one of these) often mention the disparity between the models and their use in practice. They suggest that advisers are either applying the diagnostic to the wrong type of company, or they cite a lack of training, which in their words means 'advisors still require more education about the principles underlying benchmarking' (Jaques and Povey, 2007:657).

The idea of preparing the client for the support or 'clientification' that Hjalmarsson and Johansson (2003) talk about comes to mind as I think about going through this process. The BPD required a focus of attention towards a generalised view of organisation, with individuals subsumed into this view as mere resources. Van Maanen et al. (2007) point out that organisational researchers know that narratives suggesting such an orderly, standard model of the research process are rather misleading. This was how I understood the results of the benchmarking process. However, while the aggregated figures of the BPD database offered little possibility of gaining an accurate comparison, I knew it could act as a gateway for funding. The process would open up the opportunity to find Mary a consultant who might be able to help with the company's issues. Thomas Johnston, the consultant who I had had the altercation with in the HEBN meeting several years before, came to mind to support the BPD project. We had worked together several times by then and I trusted him. I gave him a summary of key issues and because of the urgency of Mary's situation he agreed to start the process before the full agreement for the funding had come through, effectively working for nothing. I put together the application and waited.

Before bringing this narrative back to what happened next, the concept that Elias (1956:229) talks of as a 'detour by detachment' brings a further consideration into the story. Griffin and Stacey (2005:72) explain why this is important:

> Elias argues that it is possible, through a 'detour via detachment', to better understand the structure and the dynamics of the processes in which we are

> embedded and thereby be able to 'position' ourselves (for lack of a better term) within those processes in ways that will improve our chances of reaching a desired future.

In the national take-up of BPD funding, it had not taken long for the myriad of Business Link advisers, consultants and clients across the network to respond to this opportunity. I was one of many, and what followed was that, due to a high level of demand that had taken the funding body by surprise, the government, without warning, withdrew the stream of funding overnight. Thankfully, because I had already submitted the application I managed to convince my manager to allow the funding 'under the wire'. Thomas was able to continue the work with Mary and David. I felt relieved as I handed over responsibility to him.

Part three – the detective work begins

I had been in contact with Thomas about the problem, giving him as much information as I could before I stepped back. He sent updates and the tale that he told was one of initial conflict. He and David had gone head to head; David did not like people telling him what to do, but with Thomas's tenacity, and perhaps because he felt some responsibility to me and the promise of consultancy fees, he continued working with them. He looked closely at the accounts. They all sat down and made some difficult decisions to keep the business afloat. The bookkeeper was 'let go'; she had been paying herself £30 an hour, and taking liberties in this environment in which no one really knew what she was doing. Importantly, Thomas had discovered a problem while looking over the figures. All the projects were costed with a five per cent snagging fee held back until the construction projects were signed off by their clients. He found that they had not reclaimed this for most of the projects (a fact that the bookkeeper had overlooked), hence the severity of the business's cash flow and profitability problems. Thomas worked with them to address the issues, holding their hand metaphorically through these difficult times. It meant a substantial change for them. Talking of how consultants take a role in supporting clients through change, Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) suggest it is similar to the idea of liminality, supporting clients to come to terms with changes. David agreed his Porsche had to go – along with other things that freed up the cash needed to keep the business from going under. This may not have happened without the support of the BPD process in keeping the exploration of business issues going.

It is satisfying to hear news of a client's progress. Thomas told me that he had worked with them to request the back payments from many of their projects, although not all money was recovered. He also set up systems to stop this happening in the future. Mary and David had

moved out of the 'posh' office with the four empty desks and based the business back at home to save costs. It sounded to me as though they were rebuilding the business and I felt that I had done the best I could as an adviser. In setting this narrative out as a drama, I have developed it in a story format which initially had a rather abrupt ending, reflecting the point at which I left my role as an adviser. As a postscript, I moved on from Business Link shortly after this and did not get the chance to go back to see Mary and David in person. However, a few years after this had taken place I met up with Thomas and he said that, serendipitously, he had attended a business dinner and found himself sitting at a table with them. He told me that Mary had asked after me and that the business had continued to trade. I felt pleased to hear news of them.

Identifying emerging themes in advising practice

While each of the narratives developed here may seem to reflect individual and unique situations, they present an opportunity for business advising, and practice more broadly, to be explored. Lean et al. (1999) talk of the conflict advisers face between local responses to nationally determined policy and the needs of clients, in relation to the constraints of funding streams. The narratives in this chapter reflect how the 'rules of the game' are (re)negotiated in each new advising experience. The challenges I faced in this process can be seen in different forms in this chapter, in terms of the choices that arise in relation to personal values, and in response to the situations of the individuals I am directly involved with. I have identified some common themes that relate to my increasing sense of self and other, with increased confidence that I am relating to temporary leadership, and considerations around making ethical choices when working with clients. In drawing this chapter to a close, these themes bring together a number of interconnected thoughts that have arisen in the process of undertaking this research.

I am aware that these are highly individual experiences, which reflect how I was negotiating a way to go on in situations of uncertainty. Other advisers with different histories and experience would have responded in their own ways, with potentially very different outcomes. There is, therefore, no generalised view of advising. In his work in the field of international development, Mowles notes that:

> Caught between the requirements of attending to the burgeoning demands of a professionalising bureaucracy and the need to pay attention to the relationship with beneficiaries and partners, it is often the latter which suffers. The danger is that these relationships simply become an adjunct to and conduit for delivering what managers and staff in humanitarian organisations already have in mind (Mowles, 2012:549).

There are similarities between this view and issues in the field of government-funded support, and I recognise the risk that policy-driven business support for small-business owners and managers can follow a similar path, particularly if support is interpreted through the narrow lens of economic growth and increased profits. I believe that, by remaining detached from the emotional context of the advising situation, there is a risk that individuals (and this applies to adviser and client alike) experience a sense of misrecognition, of being overridden, with a sense of self not being sufficiently taken into account (Mowles, 2012). Simpson (2009:1335) uses the term 'transactional engagement' to reflect the pragmatist view of practice as a social process involving experience and action as mutually informing aspects of human conduct. In developing a view of advising as sustaining reflective conversation in a transactional process, an explanation of how individuals can explore differences and ambiguities that admit the possibility of new insight and learning is offered. This approach can also be seen as a way of working in which others are encouraged to recognise themselves in the advising process, and, as has been developed in this chapter, that in creating space for enquiry, habitual or unexamined views can be challenged and explored.

In Chapter 3, I argued that taking a narrative approach to exploring advising experience is interpretive. I further argued that this means I cannot claim to offer any generalised explanation of what took place, or prescriptions for others to act upon. This does not however suggest an autonomous or individual view of support that can be set apart from the social context from which a sense of self can arise. When exploring advising by drawing on a pragmatic form of abductive enquiry, understanding is based on an openness to developing an interpretation based on present understanding (Martela, 2015), rather than one that can be seen as universal. Burkitt suggests that 'to reflect we need a self in order to do that, so perceptions, experience, ideas and feelings are *mine'* (Burkitt, 2012:103 *italics* in original). In exploring the emergence of self, Burkitt (2012) introduces what he calls a field of perception, arising from a background of meaningful consciousness of humans as social and cultural beings. What is particularly applicable to the views put forth in this study is that this form of consciousness is highly individualised but is also related to how we see our self in relation to how others see us. Reflective conversation where self and other are recognised encourages the sharing of perspectives that may be conflictual, and offers opportunities for action and potential change. The evolving situation with Gerald and the family was an example in which these conflicts offered new understanding. A common theme of each of the narratives in the chapter is that they are exploratory and negotiated, calling out emotions and presenting my practice as sustaining conversation for exploring themes that may have remained unspoken. This exploration of advising as social, exploratory and responsive suggests that 'personal–practical

knowledge' (Ghaye, 2000) – practical wisdom or 'phronesis' (Flinn and Mowles, 2014, Flyvbjerg, 2005) – evolves as we work with others. This understanding of advising rings true to me, and offers an approach that recognises the reciprocity of advising in a way that is a more convincing explanation of experience.

In taking up the arguments of social theorists such as Elias and Mead, an argument can be made that there is rarely a simple relationship between 'action' and 'outcome', or 'strategy' and 'effect' (Newton, 2010:1372). It is also difficult to argue for a generalised view of ethical practice when coming from a complexity perspective in which the future is unknowable. By writing of my deeply personal feelings and the sense of wanting to help Mary, I am aware of something of an ethical dilemma for me. In the meeting I had choices to make about what this 'help' might be. Although not explicitly a chapter on gender, reflecting on the inclusion of these narratives has increased my awareness of something I had not previously considered relating to the values I took into these advising relationships. I have talked, for example, of how supporting Mary and helping her to find a way for her to share her concerns for the business and to take action called out deep feelings for me. In finding the funding for Thomas, I was able to take the exploration further than my Business Link role would have allowed. In addition, these actions increased David's involvement in the process of applying for funding, meaning Mary was not dealing with it alone. I did not set out specifically to talk about a gendered approach to advising here, however this theme cannot be ignored. There are other themes arising in the narrative about the family at TNN, in which the patriarchal nature of Gerald's approach to the business could be challenged openly, offering a space for Julia to air deeply held feelings to her father. It is possible that feeling I lacked a voice in similar situations where there were unequal power relations led to actions in my practice that attempted to bring out the voices of others. As Burkitt suggests, you cannot reflect without a sense of self, and in exploring these situations, further awareness for me of the inseparability of self and experience have been raised. I am also reminded that, despite a desire to bring about change, there is no knowing how any particular choice of action may work out once the adviser leaves the client situation.

Summary of key ideas

In this chapter, I have been drawing on narratives as themes of self and other, temporary leadership and ethical choice, as they arise in my work with clients. Shaw's (2011) discussion of the 'work of leadership' suggests it is about opening spaces for enquiry rather than performing a role. In the narratives here, such as the meeting with the family at TNN, I write of finding a voice to speak out in a public forum that can mean taking a risk. There are also ethical considerations discussed in how (or in the case of Mike, whether) we go on together. I

have talked of this as unpredictable, requiring responsive awareness in the conversation, and it is impossible to make claims that 'because I did this, that happened'. I challenge the view that ethics in consulting can be detached and separate from practice, and the narratives show that the adviser can never be separated from feelings and emotions or ethical considerations as they arise. I now understand these as tensions between what is happening in the local situation with clients, how I am taking up the role of adviser as a general concept, and as a self working in relation to other. Paying attention to practice, I am more comfortable now in taking action that might be challenging or conflictual, and this feeling corresponds with the idea of temporary leadership (Mowles, 2009) and the development of phronetic knowledge evolving in practical everyday interaction with others.

Chapter 7 Exploring policy, practice and getting caught up in the game

Introduction

As a Business Link adviser, I was interconnected with many individuals who were responding to new initiatives aimed at encouraging clients to take up support. The information, diagnostic and brokerage (IDB) model and gross value added (GVA[9]) data collection are examples of these initiatives, and I draw on them in arguing that they exemplify ways in which we simultaneously form and are formed by enabling and constraining tensions as we go about our daily lives (Stacey, 2003b). This perspective is rarely discussed in literature on government-funded support. In the take-up of policy-based initiatives, repeating patterns of local conversation lead to global patterning; this in turn influences how local interactions become organised, and from which societal norms and generalisations can give a sense of stability (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). In this chapter, I observe the unpredictable outcomes resulting from these tensions, both intended and unintended, and explore what they mean for practice.

An exploration of narrative patterning – advising and the IDB model

Business Link had been a Conservative-government initiative; when Tony Blair's Labour government came to power there were questions about how things might change (Forte, 2011). It seems that with each change of government the Business Link franchise network was placed under increasing scrutiny. Shifts in who was responsible for the contracting and management of the funding for Business Link services meant that this responsibility moved from the Small Business Service (SBS) to the Regional Development Agencies (RDA). Initially these were political moves that did not affect advisers or how they worked with clients. However, the debates about 'paid for' services that I found myself involved with in 2003 began to influence the way advisers worked. These developments meant that, along with the introduction of GVA measurement, IDB was being introduced at around the same time (Scott, 2010). The focus for advisers changed from working in-depth with a smaller number of companies towards doing work that was less detailed but with a greater number of clients. To describe this change, management drew on metaphors which suggested that we should move from an approach which was 'deep and narrow' to one which was more 'broad and shallow' in nature. This was a significant change for many of the existing advisers (Smallbone and Hill, 2010) who had been

[9] GVA is part of the measure of total output and income in the economy according to information held by the Office for National Statistics (ONS. *The relationship between gross value added (GVA) and gross domestic product (GDP)* [Online]. Available: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160128204104/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/economy/national-accounts/gva/relationship-gva-and-gdp/gross-value-added-and-gross-domestic-product.html [Accessed 02/09/2017.

generating income by offering consultancy, in a similar way to Jonathan's work with me at CasanCo. IDB had far-reaching effects, in that these new ways of working required a broader range of connections outside the Business Link organisation.

As discussed in Chapter 6, attending networking events to promote Business Link services and identify future clients became an important part of my role. It has been recognised that these types of activities support the building of trust and reputation (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). IDB became a way of making contact with private-sector consultants. There was a mixed reception to Business Link at networking meetings, which reflected tensions that had built up in the business-support community. Thomas Johnston alluded to this when I attended my first HEBN meeting. Private-sector advisers and consultants had been petitioning the government about unfair competition and had aired feelings publicly that pre-consultancy processes for Business Link advisers were effectively being paid for from public funds. As its services were reviewed, Business Link's role was changing from being consultancy based towards what came to be known as a 'lighter touch' approach:

> We have also changed the way advisers work so they will act far more as a facilitator with the client, far more as a process-consultant, working with clients to look at long-term objectives, identifying and putting together organisational development plans and bringing the most appropriate expertise from where that exists, rather than necessarily trying to do everything directly themselves (David Irwin, CEO of SBS, in Forte, 2011:105).

While these ideas were first put forward in 2001, it was some time before they filtered down to individual Business Link teams. On joining Business Link in 2003, I walked into the midst of this change. For some advisers, IDB was an unnecessary constraint, and this was one reason that Jonathan had left the team just before I arrived. Within six weeks of being appointed I was moved (with another adviser, Connor), into a separate team which worked along the lines that Irwin had set out. We had been separated from the main adviser team and placed into the marketing team, which set us apart from the others. However, the shift away from income generation and more into the ideas around 'diagnostic and brokerage' suited me. It was a generalist role and Connor and I were now an 'IDB' team; on our business cards our title was 'Business Solutions Manager'. We would attend adviser meetings as guests rather than team members, and the adviser team would promote their skills to us so that we could consider them as possible consultants for clients. Just as Jonathan was responding to the income generation demands of the role in his work with me, brokerage opened up opportunities for how I would work. I enjoyed exploring opportunities with clients that were not focused in advance on a

specialism. I could be more responsive to the client, and if needed I could then hand over to a specialist with their agreement. The situation with Mary and David was a good example of how this could be a transformational experience.

Exploring global patterns as we work together locally – responding to IDB

Members of the adviser team were not the only ones affected; the shift meant the marketing team were expected to generate a large number of client appointments and to up the rate of 'interventions' per year. There were new processes in place to monitor the 'level' of support offered. The interventions being monitored included telephone support, events and training of delegates (rated as level 1 or 2), through to 'GVA' relationships related to face-to-face adviser meetings (rated level 6). To give an example, in 2005/6, (as reported on the Exemplas mouse mat), the target 'penetration' figures achieved for the year were 13,208 interventions, up by over a thousand from the previous year. This increased level of activity required additional resources, including significantly increased staff numbers in our information team, which worked to supply information and pass on enquiries in cases where an adviser visit would be appropriate. As an adviser, the network of suppliers, formalised as a database known as the Supplier Brokerage Service, became a source of support to recommend to clients, adding significantly to what I as an individual could offer.

Correspondingly, there was a shift in how private-sector consultants were responding to these changes, as they saw the opening up of opportunities for potential client work. Consultants would work hard to build contacts, and the desire to promote their skills led to sessions each month where consultants came to adviser meetings to present to the team. This new way of working shifted the power relations which existed between government-funded advisers and private consultants. Each adviser would have particular consultants they could call in to support client projects, although with the introduction of SBS this was meant to be replaced by wider, more random searches. The intention was for the process to be seen to be fair and to give more suppliers a chance. This was difficult, as there was a balance to be achieved between using someone you trusted with a good track record and cronyism. I recently gained an unexpected insight into this from the supplier viewpoint from a website still accessible from 2009/2010[10]. It contains a fragment of a discussion between consultants that brings something of these discussions into the living present. In answering a question about working with Business Link

[10] http://www.ukbusinessforums.co.uk/threads/business-link-east-supplier-brokerage-service.86672/

East, there was a mixed response, reflecting the knowhow of the consultants who were responding to this then-new opportunity for the private-sector community:

> *I have had quite a few referrals from my Business Link advisor who has been great…*
>
> *My company has been running some of their Training Workshops for their Business Start-Up Programme since they started out in April 2007 and we were doing the same for Business Link Hertfordshire prior to that… So (finally!) I would say stick to it and push for the new Vouchers. Someone has to aim at the post 18 months clients, why not you???*
>
> *If you do not work your registration you are unlikely to get much work referred. You are probably one of many co's competing so you need to keep in touch with an adviser or more than one adviser so you are fresh in their mind ALL the time. If they never see you they will forget you.*
>
> *I haven't received one enquiry through this either since registering in Nov 08...*

As I read these fragments of conversation, I can see that there is no one best way suggested, just a message to get involved, and some guidance about finding an adviser to befriend. These responsive conversational interactions have been described by Elias and others though the analogy of dance (Dunning and Hughes, 2012). The shifting configurations of dancers on a dance floor reflect real-life social processes, rather than abstract comparisons to fixed 'networks' or biological systems (Elias, 1998). It is possible to envisage configurations in which recognisable patterns emerge in the spontaneous reaction to brokerage, such as those reflected in the supplier comments above in which the interdependence of individuals is clear. Reading of this sharing of knowledge and finding ways to make the best of the opportunity, I am mindful of similar patterns of behaviour occurring while I was finding my way round as an adviser. These patterns and processes can also be related to another initiative instigated by policy makers: the introduction of GVA measurement.

GVA – 'the holy grail' of funded business support

When I took up the adviser role in 2003, a new initiative was being introduced through which advisers were expected to 'gather' GVA data from clients. At the time there was a suggestion that GVA per head was the best measure of regional economic performance that existed (Adams et al., 2003). The idea was that this would give a figure for a particular region, enabling

comparison with other regions across the UK. This view of monitoring performance was not without its challenges, as Adams et al. say:

> There are clearly differences in prosperity within as well as between regions. However, GVA is an unreliable measure at this smaller spatial scale (Adams et al., 2003:i).

This suggestion that regional data compared to a national figure is considered 'smaller scale' puts the data-gathering activity that we were expected to undertake into perspective. Firms of all sizes were expected to provide data for aggregation into regional and national measurements. In practice, asking for GVA from clients who might have only one or two employees, or from the many that did not have formal accounts prepared, meant there was considerable variation in the quality of the data gathered.

The rationale for GVA as a measurement of how individual producers, industries or sectors contribute to the UK economy is drawn from economic theory. A question posed on a London School of Economics blog strikes me as bearing similarities to my experience: '*Do governments lean too much on the researchers who evaluate their policies*? (Page, 2013)'. As Business Link was a government-funded service, there was a requirement to show 'value for money', and a need to 'evaluate the impact' of the work that advisers were doing with clients. The way we were encouraged to work was based on the belief that organisations can be made to work 'better', to become more 'efficient', and that it is possible to gather 'evidence' on which future decision making can be based. In other words, the aim was to bring a sense of 'certainty' to the organisational activity of clients and to the evaluation process. Evaluation was an ever-present reality of working with clients, with the ideology of continual monitoring seen as a way to create a sense of control. This requirement for collection of data to enable evaluation drove new initiatives for advisers and had far-reaching consequences. GVA would become the way that adviser activity was monitored, with the intention of making the connection between advising activity and increased client performance.

In an exploration of GVA linked to economic value, it is pertinent to discuss the generalised view of the concept of 'the economy' assumed in this measurement. Brian Arthur challenged this in the development of CAS ideas at the Santa Fe Institute (Waldrop, 1993). He was interested in how self-organising small, random events could lead to the seemingly stable patterns recognised as what is called 'the economy'. He explored these ideas as a theory of increasing returns. He noticed that:

> Conventional economic theory chooses not to study the unfolding of the patterns its agents create but rather to simplify its questions in order to seek analytical solutions. Thus it asks what behavioural elements (actions, strategies, and expectations) are consistent with the aggregate patterns these behavioural elements co-create? (Arthur, 1999:106)

Rather than the linear assumptions of traditional economic theory, Arthur argued that the economy should be considered from a complexity perspective, from which the non-linear activity of individuals will create the dynamic patterns that lead to unpredictability and change. Although I have previously argued that the imposition of boundaries by CAS has limitations, this is an important critique of economics. Arthur is identifying a relationship between ongoing everyday local interactions and global patterns. These are not separate levels of activity but are simultaneously forming and being formed by each other, and, in this view, the global patterns that emerge that are collectively perceived as 'the economy'. Stacey's view of complex responsive processes of relating brings further understanding of the relationship between the behavioural 'elements' of 'agents' that Arthur is alluding to above. From this perspective, it is paradoxical that local interaction of individuals produces these population-wide patterns, while at the same time these large patterns impose constraints on how agents interact (Mowles, 2015, Stacey, 2003b).

In thinking about these assumptions, the mainstream view is to talk of the economy as an entity, rather than the dynamic patterning of interdependent individuals. This comes from the Kantian influence in seeing human activity 'as if' it is part of a system. This has created a tendency for reification, and the reduction of process activities to static objects (Shaw, 2015). Griffin and Stacey (2005) talk of how the hypothetical nature of Kant's suggestion that we can treat human activity 'as if' it is part of a system has been lost in general views of management. I have discussed these tensions throughout this research, and the idea of 'organisation' reified as a bounded entity is an example of this. This contrasts with the complex social processes from which an organisation emerges. These reifications can be seen as a way of understanding the natural tendency to make sense of the messiness of lived experience. There are, however, hidden problems:

> Many of us have been taught to think almost entirely in terms of things, where conceptual things are rather like material *things*. They are clearly defined, stable, graspable, measurable, countable, finished entities. When people talk in this way … they fail to notice the socially constructed nature of these apparent 'objects' (Shaw 2015:393).

In relating this to experience of GVA, when working with the PhD group I discussed 'GVA' as if it were a 'thing', and spoke of how it seemed to have a power of its own, expecting others outside the context of Business Link to understand its position of importance to me. One of the problems of this is how we use abbreviations to represent something that we assume others understand. GVA as used in the Business Link situation is an abbreviation for 'gross value added' data, and this expanded term offers more detail regarding what the abbreviation may actually represent. It was only when challenged that I became aware of how I was caught up in the language and activity of reification. When I was questioned about what GVA meant to me, it felt like a mirror was being held up to my thinking, enabling a deeper exploration of the interconnectedness these ideas had to how I was working with others. For this reason, I have purposely not abbreviated 'complex responsive processes of relating' to CRPR. The words themselves convey something that expresses what I am trying to explain in a way that a shortened form can never do.

Taking up GVA in my local practice

I had been told, soon after joining Business Link, that all advisers were going to have to collect GVA data, but for existing advisers this new way of working created a wave of anxiety and conflict in team meetings. There was a lot of contention in our team discussions about the purpose and value of this activity, but collecting GVA data was non-negotiable, and each member of the team was given a target for 'gathering' it. Mixed views were expressed, with some advisers being highly resistant to this change and stating that they felt it was a way of policing their work practices. Others claimed that '*clients would never give us that information'*. This was countered by others saying that it made sense that advisers should be gathering at least some financial data if they were helping them to grow! As a new member of staff, I was surprised at the tension that GVA was generating.

In reflecting on my own engagement with GVA gathering, when it first became one of my targets it was imposed with minimal guidance. I was to collect twenty GVAs in the first year (when I left Business Link this had gone up to ninety-five). As I began to go out and talk to clients, I realised that there were problems to overcome. As an aggregated measure of productivity, GVA meant little to the clients providing the information. Working for a government-funded organisation, some clients had visions of data being handed over to catch them out in some way. I soon found that asking a client for GVA data in an 'anxious' way made them anxious too. I could end up failing to collect the data I needed. GVA was continually on my mind; I would be thinking: '*When would be a good time to ask? Will I get them to agree?'* I learned what worked by trial and error and my practice evolved over time, developing

practices and responses to pacify the most anxious clients. This also reduced my anxiety about how or when I might ask clients for the data. In paying attention to this process, it was clear that if I was going to get a new client to give me highly confidential personal data, then I needed to build trust and rapport. I was inadvertently caught up in the GVA game, in which the sense of 'being let in' became a necessity.

Thorpe and Clarke (2008) take a simplistic view of this process by suggesting that as companies often distort their profit figures, GVA can give a clearer (and more useful) picture of the performance of firms. As there was no gross profit figure included in the data collection process that might flag up operational issues, I would dispute this point. The nature of GVA was that discussions of such things as 'depreciation of capital costs' bore little relation to what was going on for owners in their ordinary day-to-day experiences. Also, very few clients would suggest anything other than an increase in turnover and profit in summing up their future activity. This meant that it was not difficult to provide figures to the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) that reflected a future increase in profit projected for the clients we were working with, at least in the short term. The projections for future growth were just that … projected imaginary figures of what might, or might not, happen. However, on a different note, I found that GVA collection was an opportunity to get figures for the past full year. This would mean that the client could make a projection for the year ahead, so that we could see what might be required to achieve this, agreeing on actions that were relevant to this projection. This meant a discussion about 'where are you now?', 'where would you like to get to?' and 'what can I/we do to help you get there' was important. While this might suggest a linear process, this questioning became an opportunity for more open conversation that often led to interesting and challenging themes arising.

James C. Scott (1998) has written about how state intervention can have unintended and far-reaching consequences. He talks of how those involved with policy forming can get caught up in simplifications, thus overlooking the tensions between policy and practice. He suggests that this simplistic view has led to situations where ultimately there have been negative consequences as these decisions play out over time. An example that he uses is of the intensive management of forests in Germany in the 1700s. The aim of the policy was to increase timber production; however, the particular forestry practices that ensued led to a build-up of disease and other problems. Within a hundred years, the term forest-death (*Waldsterben*) was added to the German language to reflect the outcome of this experiment. While GVA is not comparable to this in terms of the context or time scale, there are similarities in the way that GVA came into being, with the intention of encouraging increased productivity and the measurement of

advising activity. There were unintended consequences to GVA that meant that less favourable behaviours began to emerge. It was not possible at the time to see how GVA gathering would contribute to the closure of Business Link in 2011; however, the ripples of these activities were to influence that decision.

Ideology and population-wide discourse as global patterns - the game of GVA

I began to get a sense of the emergence of broader patterns of behaviour when, in 2006, Business Link Hertfordshire merged with Essex, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, Norfolk, and Bedfordshire and came under the regional Business Link East contract. Business Link Hertfordshire went from ten advisers to being part of a team of over ninety across the region. At that time, I changed from an adviser role and became training and development manager for the west of the region, supporting the adviser teams as we were finding ways to work together. As Hertfordshire and Essex in partnership had won the Business Link East contract, I could argue that I was part of the 'winning team'. Many advisers came from other Business Links in the region that had applied for but not been awarded the contract. The tensions that existed resonate with the way that Mead (1925) talks of the energy that is generated in competitive situations:

> The whole history of warfare between societies and within societies shows how much more readily and with how much greater emotional thrill we realize our selves in opposition to common enemies than in collaboration with them (Mead, 1925:277).

Prior to the consolidation of the teams, there had been a lot of rivalry, gossip and speculation about what other teams were doing, resembling the established and outsider relations that Elias and Scotson (1994) identified in their research. When advisers came together under one contract, much of this behaviour continued. GVA was particularly disliked, and initially teams had limited success in meeting team targets. As a training and development manager, I was expected to encourage and support advisers to increase GVA conversations and data collection with clients. Each team of advisers from the other Business Links brought their own way of doing things, and I found that many advisers were not keen to take up new ways of working to support some level of consistency and measurement of this much larger contract. I faced a lot of hostility, particularly from advisers who had joined from the other Business Links.

In my role, I spent many hours encouraging existing advisers to use the newly introduced computer system that many were finding difficult. In travelling to other Business Link offices to work with advisers, I got the sense that, for some, their lack of compliance to the central

processes was an act of resistance – a not wanting to conform to the increasingly pressured environment of the amalgamated Business Link East. Scott (1990) talks of how individuals can find ways to gain a sense of power in situations where they feel overly controlled; the reticence of advisers to work under these new rules felt like this. A new CRM system was under development to which all advisers were to input their data weekly, and a report was generated monthly for managers to use to monitor individual and team progress. Having had a very slow start in the first few months of the regional contract, it was decided to publish these reports more widely, so that all advisers could see how they and the other regional teams were doing.

The decision to publish monthly data meant that adviser activity was available for all to see. New language became part of the organisational discourse. A favourite term in the adviser teams was 'the scores on the doors', coming from a TV catchphrase from many years earlier, which was shorthand for 'team progress'. 'Scores' were visible from across the region and the publishing of the report meant that the 'shame' of being at the bottom of the league tables was enough to start a frenzy of activity. There was also a lot more interest in the computer systems training I was offering the teams. Even the more recalcitrant advisers went online, spending hours getting up to date on 'the system', now that their activity was under scrutiny by other teams. Something about this activity suggests the idea of Bentham's Panopticon. The Panopticon was an institutional design intended to facilitate surveillance of prison inmates by allowing a manager/watchman to see into every cell (Mowles, 2011). Bentham's idea was that even though it was impossible for the watchman to observe all prisoners at once, to avoid penalty they would control their own behaviour as if they were being watched. With the exposure of GVA data, advisers took on a surveillance process of themselves and their team's performance. Mead (1934) talks of taking up the attitude of the 'generalised other' as a way of understanding the formation of consciousness and self-consciousness. The shift to increased awareness of GVA is an example of how such processes lead to us putting our self in the position of how others might see us, and of the influence of this on how we might choose to act. This reflects a theme that I am developing throughout this thesis, that of the reflexive self emerging only in the context of how we understand others and their possible responses to our actions. As Mowles (2015) suggests, this perspective-taking is a paradox in which social processes are simultaneously individualising.

Once advisers became aware of the report, and how they would be judged by others, GVA gathering acquired the elements of a 'game'. Advisers perceived GVA itself as having an increased value. Within a short time, GVA became like a currency within the organisation. In discussing human activity, Scott (1998) uses the term 'metis', which he translates as 'cunning'.

This term has some correspondence with the idea of phronesis (discussed in Chapter 3), as both terms reflect practical engagement in the world. In thinking about GVA, I could see how I and others, in response to increasing targets, were adapting and responding to the evolving situation, from which particular patterns of behaviour developed. In this way the suggestion of 'metis', as a form of 'cunning', differs from the concept of 'phronesis' which carries the less-manipulative connotation of how we might act from the basis of experience (Raphals, 1992). Data would be traded: if GVA was gathered from a client an adviser did not necessarily want to visit again, for example, or if another adviser had built a prior relationship, data could be handed over. This emergent GVA gaming was a self-organising activity, but was encouraged openly by management. An initiative was set up awarding a prize to the first person to get to 100 GVAs. Shortly after this announcement, an adviser achieved GVA data from 150 clients and was given a bottle of champagne to publicly recognise his activities.

The 'trophy-hunting' approach that developed meant there was not enough time to service all these 'GVA clients', and the long-term issues created by this target-setting meant that follow-up activity with the client was increasingly overlooked. A new term came into being as the pressure for numbers increased, suggesting that clients were being 'mugged for GVA'. Burkitt (2010) points to issues of society articulated through an ideology of individualism, where motives are disconnected from our connection with others. If actions are seen as 'mine and nobody else's' (ibid: 335), we can overlook the impact of our actions on others. Action plans, which could potentially be an overview of next steps for the client, became less important as, for some advisers, hitting targets became their main goal. While individuals developed their own ways of achieving their targets, these activities were not disconnected acts. As advisers and clients were responding to the influences of GVA, they were cooperating and competing in evolving interdependent webs of social interaction. The effect over time was more serious; the race for numbers changed the way many of the advisers worked. We were not the only Business Link, and similar patterns of behaviours responding to the increasingly high targets were developing in other regions across England. There were other consequences, and as targets for amounts of GVA data gathered increased there was a decrease in the value that clients put on business support. A new narrative began to emerge nationally of how shallow and impersonal business advice had become (North and Baldock, 2009). This affected another major factor for adviser measurement – 'customer satisfaction' – setting off another gaming process imposed by management, this time to sustain the level of satisfaction percentages.

Situating GVA experience in a broader social context

Around this time, I remember being at a conference and having a conversation with Richard Thorpe, one of the researchers mentioned above. When he found out I was presenting a paper as a researcher, and that I was a Business Link adviser, he talked enthusiastically about GVA as an effective way for business advice to be measured. In my private conversation I was considering whether to go along with his specific view of GVA, or tell the 'truth' of what I was experiencing. I weighed up whether I should repeat the gossip-based facts of GVA collection with whether this might reflect negatively on me and my professional role. Was it just me who thought about GVA in this way? I felt that the credibility of my practice, and possibly my research, might be at risk. What we choose to reveal and conceal in a particular situation as we talk with others is not always recognised (Miller, 2008), and how these are influenced by private thoughts as they come to mind. I chose not to reveal this personal experience; instead, as we talked I kept the detail of the GVA gathering process to myself.

The conversation with Richard reflects how not saying something is an action as much as saying something. This is a theme that Scott (1990) picks up in his work relating to public and hidden transcripts. Scott looks at power and how it plays out between different groups in what is spoken or left unsaid. In reflecting on his anthropological study in Malay, he talks of conversation with villagers, as well as with those in positions of power. He writes of how he 'had to choke back responses that would not have been prudent' (Scott, 1990:x), and the 'nearly physical pressure' that comes from not voicing thoughts. Scott articulates how he made a choice about what he considered was prudent, based on his perception of how others might react, reflecting again Mead's idea of self-consciousness in taking the attitude of the generalised other.

In extending this understanding further, when taking into account experience of the self there is a complex dimension to be considered regarding how 'me' and the subjective 'I' arise simultaneously as we interact. Simpson (2009:1336) draws on Mead to suggest that:

> Without the 'I' principle, the self would be nothing more than a stable and convergent reflection of social structure, and there would be no potential for creative or reconstructive activity.

This suggests that while we continuously act spontaneously (as an 'I') this will always take place within the enabling constraints of contexts we are working in, and our perception of the particular people we are working with (from the socialised 'me'). We are social even in our private thoughts. This embodied 'me' equates to habits of conduct that have been acquired

reflexively through transactional engagement (Simpson, 2009). The 'me' is accessible to conscious, reflexive examination and Mead suggests that:

> It is just because the individual finds himself taking the attitudes of the others who are involved in his conduct that he becomes an object for himself. It is only by taking the roles of others that we have been able to come back to ourselves (Mead, 1925:268).

However, in this reflective process it is not possible to predict the outcome of any social act that is formed in the conversation of gestures. Despite our perceptions of others, we can never know what the response to any gesture will be; the spontaneity of conversation will therefore always have the potential for novelty, opening up possibilities for change.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Burkitt (1991) suggests that if we view self and society as always in relation, we understand humans only in connection to other people. We only become a self because of other selves, and, as Mowles (2011) points out, our thinking arises in the internalisation of these social process. Our socialisation can become a powerful form of social control that is often an unconscious act (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). In the conversation with Richard, I was similarly acting as a 'self', reflecting in the moment on how the objective 'me' was situated in relation to him and others in the research and advising community. As Mowles (2011:104) suggests 'no individual who has a stake and status in the game they are playing has an interest in calling the game into question'. With Richard Thorpe, when I chose not to share my view of GVA I had considered the risk of acting in a way that potentially undermined the legitimacy of a particular discourse that had value to us both.

'Habitus', 'illusio' and the idea of the game

Although I am talking of GVA interactions as local, in that we could only interact with a limited number of others at one time, in this activity widespread patterns emerged from the repetition of interaction. Griffin and Stacey (2005) talk of 'social objects', a concept initially discussed by Mead (1938). Social objects not only constitute a stimulus for action, but also influence how we will act in relation to our perception of them (Da Silva, 2007). Those involved with policy decisions were acting into the belief that this form of measurement would offer them an increased ability to monitor and evaluate the use of public funds. While advisers were responding to GVA in their own way, similar responses were occurring in the conversations with the management of the Business Link contract in preparing the management reports. The sense of GVA taking on a life of its own could be related to this idea, where the social object

only exists in repetitive patterning, as we particularise generalisations in many interactions with others.

This narrative of GVA data collection shows how the policy that initiated it could be understood as a gesture, with the response being the way in which it was taken up by advisers and managers in their everyday work with clients. Stacey makes the comparison between Mead, Elias and Bourdieu and how they talk of the socialisation process in which we are situated as an example of getting caught up in particular behaviours. The term 'habitus', used in Elias and Bourdieu's work, explains a tendency to act that cannot be explained in terms of conscious rational action. It is often a non-reflexive aspect of the self, and we are not always aware of how it influences the activities that we undertake. All responses are enabled and constrained by societal norms, individual intentions, emotions and values, reflecting how becoming invested in particular ways of working can take the form of a game that influences choices of action. Stacey (2011:432) uses the term 'immersing' to describe what we are doing as we act locally when we are preoccupied in the game in ways which 'unconsciously reflect the generalisations and idealisations, the habitus of our society'. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice identifies the influence of 'habitus'. He talks of this as paradoxical in a similar way to Mead's understanding of the social self, in which our responses are formed and re-formed in social activity, giving rise to further social acts (Burkitt, 1991).

In contrast, the term 'illusio' relates to how individuals can gain a sense of purpose from participation in these social games, providing some 'meaning of life' (Pellandini-Simányi, 2014:660). I was struck by Colley's (2012) research, which looks at how recent government cuts to funding have impacted on professionals in government-funded organisations, with them experiencing diminishing ethical and social connection to their work and their surroundings. This highlights the disparities between institutional tick boxes and local practice in the consideration of ethics. I have written in other chapters about how I felt that advising gave me a larger sense of self through working with others. Mowles (2015) talks of the importance of taking the perspective of both the 'airman and the swimmer', a phrase that came from the writing of Elias (2001). In remaining alert to a longer-term view, Elias talks of the risks of taking one perspective over another. As well as the particular circumstances and situations we are concerned with, he suggests that only by taking the two together do we get a more balanced picture. While I have suggested that immersing myself in business support enabled me to gain a greater sense of self and a feeling that I was using my experience to support others, there are always risks that this could be compromised by other influences. When I sensed that Mary Jones (Chapter 6) was close to breaking point I felt I was able to make a difference;

nevertheless, it was only because of the government-funded support available that I could offer the help needed. Bourdieu (1990) made the observation that we can get so absorbed in the game we are caught up in that we can forget that we are playing a game at all. He explains that experience of the game, and how it is played out, gives it a subjective sense:

> For those who take part and therefore acknowledge what is at stake (this is illusio in the sense of investment in the game and the outcome, interest in the game, commitment to the presuppositions – doxa – of the game) (Bourdieu, 1990:66).

He argues further that paradoxically it also gives an objective sense, where as individuals get a feel for the game, there is the effect of 'consensual validation'(ibid:66). This could mean that getting caught up in the game leads to behaviours that disconnect us from what might be considered an ethical way of working. Stacey asserts 'that excessive imposition of targets predictably results in people gaming the system' (Stacey, 2012:124). In writing about GVA, I am aware of how I and other advisers became preoccupied with the game.

Outside of the 'habitus' of Business Link, it has become increasingly apparent that the reverence in which GVA is held seems absurd. However, airing doubts or challenges in a public forum, or calling out the game (Mowles, 2015), can leave individuals vulnerable and at risk of exclusion from the group. Burkitt (2002) points out that there is a darker side of 'habitus' that figures in power relations. He draws on Dewey's view that unreflective patterns of habit serve those who would wish to monopolise power, where leaders plan, and others are required to do the work without questioning their actions and position. Reflecting on how I was caught up in the 'game', I have become aware of the broader political discourse to which I was responding. As I write this many years after leaving my Business Link role, thinking now about what was mostly a rewarding experience reflects a darker side, and I see that in getting caught up in these games I did not pay attention or discuss them openly at the time. I cannot take the high ground here; although I would like to think I maintained my integrity and ethical practice when working with clients, I was as influenced as everyone else in ensuring that I met my targets.

Taking a critical view of the management of measurement

One of the outcomes of taking a reflexive approach to practice is that I am challenging not only the literature but also my own understanding of what I was doing when I was talking about the role of Business Link adviser. In reading an evaluation of government policy and Business Link support I am struck by the structure of the discussion, which explored the disconnect between policy and implementation (Arshed et al., 2016). With the benefit of hindsight, (the paper was

published five years after the demise of Business Link), the authors discuss a number of themes that strike me as important in the policy/practice debate. The research takes a systems-based perspective on what they consider to be issues relating to the provision of business support. There is no questioning of whether there might be other reasons for the perceived problems to be found outside this dualistic view. Arshed et al. (2016) identify a number of themes. One of these is their view that there was a lack of guidance from the policy makers which led to poor understanding of what Business Link should have delivered and how. Secondly, they emphasise the way contractual duties meant that contractors 'tended to follow the letter, rather than the spirit, of the contract' (ibid:1601). This particularly stands out for me because of the experience of GVA collection, which was a specific contractual requirement. There is no consideration of what the implications or penalties might have been for not meeting these contractual obligations.

The report makes a third point relating to the lack of 'in-depth' evaluation that would have given a 'feedback loop' for improvements. From the position of adviser, I know we were continually reporting back with regard to the contract, but rarely were any suggestions for improvements taken up. Mostly, the feedback reported the achieving of targets, leading to an increase in targets to be achieved within the existing funding of the contract. One further point Arshed et al. mention was that little importance was placed on the businesses and their owner-managers, with all efforts directed at meeting targets to ensure avoiding detrimental impacts on RDA and local enterprise agency funding. This highlights a tension that every Business Link was caught up in, that of generalised policy versus local delivery. There is little understanding of the emergence of power, for example, or the multiple intentions of all participating in this process; this applies to policy makers as much as it does to advisers. There is no 'why?' question posed that might point to some of the issues that I am talking about here. A final point the authors make relates to a disillusioned community of entrepreneurs and SMEs, putting the blame for this issue on to support providers, implying a failure of advisers to sustain good working relationships with clients. I was disheartened by this. In response, I argue that policy makers start with a generalised understanding of what they are requesting *a priori,* providing a highly simplistic view of a complex process. I find support in the point that Stacey (2010) makes:

> The organizational reality is that no one, including powerful government figures, can control or plan the responsive interplay of intentions which is why the population-wide patterns that emerge are unpredictable, why we are continually surprised and find ourselves having to deal with unexpected events.

> Also, we can, perhaps, begin to see that organisational reality may well be paradoxically intended and unintended at the same time (Stacey, 2010:5).

The conclusions of Arshed et al. (2016) do not take into account any of the social factors that may be influencing what they consider to be this 'disconnect', a term that reflects an inherent dualism.

Further reflection on paradoxical tensions between local interaction and global patterns

In both of the narrative themes, I explore how individuals worked together cooperatively and competitively in response to the IDB and GVA policy initiatives. In paying attention to local interaction and global patterns, I recognise that these can bring forth unintended and unpredictable consequences that can work against the aim of the policy decision. In the IDB, case, the increasing interest of many private consultants came from their realisation that they could work with clients and gain benefits from the same public funds they had been complaining about previously. In drawing on these 'particular' situations, I am arguing that this approach can be used as a way of generalising about what might be happening in others. As discussed in Chapter 3, my aim is not to state general truths about support, or to suggest that this experience is typical in all situations. Here I am highlighting a 'generative tension' between the general and the particular, a dialectic tension of practice under perpetual construction. In Hegel's words:

> it is in this process that this consciousness, instead of being self-identical, is in fact nothing but a purely causal, confused medley, the dizziness of a perpetually self-engendered disorder (Hegel et al., 1977:124-125)

This, he explains, is the negation of all that we know as single and separate, occupying us with what is contingent, what we know from our immediate experience. In taking a reflexive position, which here is thinking about my interaction with others and coming from the take-up of IDB and GVA, I recognise a view of knowledge as emerging from experience. Hegel explains this as the movement of unrest:

> Point out likeness or identity to it, and it will point out unlikeness or non-identity; and when it is now confronted with what it has just asserted, it turns round and points out likeness or identity (ibid:126).

This exploration of what we experience in the moment as we make sense represents a continuous state of flux. I recognise this as similar to the uncertainty of the conversational process as a form of continual enquiry, from which evolving practice and practical wisdom

emerge. This paradox is one that is recognised in the complexity sciences, but which is overlooked in many other theoretical positions in social research, such as in the evaluations of Arshed et al. (2016) on the problems of Business Link. In making sense of practice, these interdependent, web-like patterns, which emerge as we go about our day-to-day activities with others, are difficult to find in the literature on small firms and on advising practice. I believe this is a significant gap in the literature.

Summary of key ideas

In this chapter, I have explored how local situated interaction with clients becomes part of population-wide patterns, and that these patterns are simultaneously influencing how individuals are interacting. In taking up these themes, I discuss how government policy is taken up in local practice. Availability of funding at a particular time, a client in need, a contact with a supplier I felt I could trust, all played into my day-to-day activities. In the same way the need to evaluate government funds influenced those working together to develop policy initiatives that led to GVA and other ideas. These are acts replicated across the Business Link community, influencing the take-up and evaluation of policy decisions. Similarly, this influences others, as in the increased interest of suppliers in shifting away from competing and towards finding ways to cooperate, as they learned of the potential economic benefits of brokerage. None of these things could be predicted, but they evolved through self-organising processes in the interdependent activities of business advice. In the next chapter, I will explore this further in relation to evolving practice. It is from this perspective that I am suggesting my practice is under perpetual construction, influenced both by the immediate situations from which I am acting locally, but also paradoxically as the local is shaping the global patterns into which I act.

Chapter 8 Exploring experience beyond Business Link as continuous evolution of practice

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how threads of conversation about business and business advising continued to be part of my practice after leaving the Business Link role. In 2010, I had moved full time to UH, cutting my ties with the majority of my Business Link clients. This did not, however, mean that I was working entirely in a teaching and research role. Although I did not specifically seek to continue working with clients, I took up some opportunities to continue with advising work when they were presented to me. In this chapter, I explore the enabling and constraining tensions I encountered in a business experiencing high growth and in the planning and launching of a start-up business. From the perspective of these narratives, I explore how my sense of self and practice has evolved over the course of this research. Burkitt suggests that 'everyday life is profoundly related to *all* activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond and their common ground' (Burkitt, 2004:211). As I discuss these advising experiences outside the enabling constraints of Business Link, I make the connection to how this learning informed my practice of work with clients and beyond. Throughout this research, I have talked of my work with established businesses; however, in talking here about the relationship with an entrepreneur on the development of his newly formed business and work with the owner of a start-up company, I believe the argument for organisations being social constructs rather than fixed entities is further strengthened. Stacey (2003b) has argued that we cannot point to where an organisation is – all we can do is to point to the artefacts that we use with others in working together. The reification of organisation in the form of an entity that can be studied, controlled and managed overlooks the way that we are constructing these ideas in our ongoing everyday interaction, and this will be further explored here.

Advising outside the constraints of Business Link

In 2006, I began working at UH as a visiting lecturer in the strategy group, and this was my formal introduction to strategy theory. My forays into teaching were filled with anxiety and moments of revelation, balanced out by scepticism about how these ideas related to the context of business advising that I was involved in at the time. Teaching gave me the opportunity to explore and analyse these ideas. The models and frameworks that fill out the densely written text books on the topic (de Wit and Meyer, 2004, Johnson et al., 2008) talk, with very few exceptions, about large companies. A pattern developed in my teaching: working with students to think about these theoretical ideas as general principles, but then thinking about how they might be taken up in individual situations where experience is taken seriously. This process is

a bit like setting up and then knocking down ideas – and some students like it better than others. In the context of entrepreneurial education, developing these processes encourages reflexive learning as a way of seeking to explore the interconnection between experience and knowing for entrepreneurs (Higgins et al., 2013b). There is a similarity between this learning approach and my reflections that suggest that when advising I am often trying *not* to tell people what to do! I had evolved an approach with clients where drawing on experience often called out new ways of thinking. This can be understood as a way of providing opportunities to think about what was going on for the client, and create a space to 'reflect and consider the depth of their lived experiences and practices' (Higgins et al., 2013b:152). Although I had the title of 'adviser' I had recognised over time that rather than being an 'expert' coming in to give advice, I was often more of a facilitator, counsellor or coach. Perhaps becoming more of a generalist under the IDB model enabled me to work more in this way. However, I also wanted to take a different approach to my working relationship with Jonathan, my adviser at CasanCo, this being a relationship in which I felt he was keener to impose his ideas on my situation than to listen and work together with me.

From my work with Jonathan, and in working with clients myself, I had become wary of solutions-based advice and cautious about the take-up of ideas by the client. There is something unsettling when a client seizes on something that you have said and then takes this as if it were a prescription. I had an example of this in a conversation that took place sometime after I left Business Link. I had a call from a friend who was concerned about his son, Trevor. I did not want to take the lead in setting up a meeting through a third party, so I suggested that if Trevor wanted to talk about his business then I would leave it for him to contact me. A few days later I got a call and we agreed to meet up at my house.

I invited Trevor to tell me something about his business, mindful of his father's concerns about the high levels of stress he suspected his son was experiencing. The situation was unusual in comparison to many clients, as Trevor was struggling with exceptionally high growth in a recent start-up. The literature on small-business growth is extensive, and for Business Link policy makers there was a strong focus on achieving high growth as an important contribution to the economy and to employment (Lee, 2014, Smallbone and Baldock, 2004). However, it has been recognised that 'high-growth firms do not grow in the same way' (Delmar et al., 2003:190). This has been argued as coming from the heterogeneity of small firms, exacerbated by factors such as industry type and unique organisational contexts which make it difficult to pursue growth. With Trevor, these ideas around pursuing growth were not particularly helpful, as his story was one of responding to the challenges that unexpected high growth brings.

Trevor told me that the business had gone from start-up to a £9 million turnover in just under six years. This had come unexpectedly from the launch of a trilogy of books that had significantly increased interest in the products he had chosen to sell. He told me of his background working in a corporate environment, and I could see that he was motivated by the high-risk nature of growing the business. In the discussion, I realised that while his experience in large organisations had been useful in setting up a potentially high-growth business, it was less helpful in understanding the dynamic relationships involved in the day-to-day challenges of making it work. He talked animatedly of what was going on for him, sounding mostly positive as he described particular people and situations. I might have said initially that I felt that I had been 'let in', as Trevor talked openly to me about his business; certainly, the entrepreneurial story he told of starting the business was engaging and extremely detailed. However, taking up the ideas of revealing and concealing (Miller, 2008), despite feeling caught up in his enthusiasm and general positivity I had a visceral sense of concern. Juxtaposed in my mind was the call from Trevor's father that had told a less positive story. I sensed that perhaps there were unspoken tensions that Trevor glossed over. I asked him to clarify a few points, asking about two people he had mentioned that I had some questions about.

In going back to the names and situations that had struck me as important, he became less open. Talking about one situation with a member of staff, he physically gestured with his hands as if moving this uncomfortable situation to one side. I felt a visceral response that there was something going on for him that I sensed but could not directly articulate. I stayed with these questions about staff and they led to a much less rosy picture of the company than he had initially portrayed. As we sustained this open and reflective conversation I began to get a better understanding of the problems and the stress he was experiencing. I am reminded of Baumard's (1999) point that it can be a trap to not challenge something that is shared. I recognise this as a reflexive process of paying attention to private conversation going on simultaneously with the conversation with him. In the years of working with Business Link clients, I had learned to stay with these visceral responses. I recognise that although it was possible they might not lead anywhere they might, as in this situation, reflect the opening up of themes that opened up a more animated conversation. Later in the conversation he commented '*You are like a business psychiatrist*!' I interpreted this as implying he was finding the process useful. It felt pleasing to help him reflect on the business and gain new insights.

Out of the blue, as the meeting ended Trevor announced he had had a 'light bulb moment' and had made a decision to recruit an HR manager! I felt a moment of panic. I had planted the seed regarding HR when we were discussing some of his management issues, and it felt as if he had

taken this and seen it as a 'solution'. This was not what I was thinking of when I talked about the problems he seemed to have with his staff. I felt rising anxiety that adding to his staff list could increase his management problems. I immediately challenged him and shared with him my concerns that this decision needed further thought. As we parted he assured me that he would not recruit immediately, and we could discuss this further when he returned from his imminent trip abroad. We agreed to meet again and my angst subsided, feeling more comfortable with how we were parting. As I reflect on my anxiety, it occurs to me that I was working here without the constraints of Business Link structures, which perhaps left me feeling more exposed or vulnerable in what I might suggest.

It was never my intention to tell Trevor what to do. Rather than offer some solution that existed outside our conversation, I wanted to stay in an exploratory process where we could think through what might work for him in his situation. However, despite my intentions, his response reflects that as individuals we have no control over how others will interpret and take up ideas beyond the advising conversation. In drawing on this example, I have the opportunity to further explore advising practice as staying with the openness of conversation. It is difficult to put into words the way fleeting and momentary emotions arise as we interact, but for me, advising is an experience that evokes emotions that can guide or influence conversation. I have talked about the sense of 'being let in' in relation to a number of client relationships. However, rather than seeing this process as crossing boundaries from outside to be let in to a position within, a more useful view is that it is the holding of space for reflective conversation. With Trevor, staying with my feelings and asking for clarification was a way of encouraging further exploratory discussion. I recognise that I felt increased connectedness to his experience when he began to open up about his anxieties. It is through this shift in energy that a sense of mutual recognition can arise. In arguing for the importance of a sense of self, I have suggested in Chapter 7 that, paradoxically, it is only in our social experience that individual selves can emerge. However, I am not suggesting that this shift gives a sense of a shared understanding. In this relational process, the responsibility for action is no longer that of adviser telling the client what to do, but of each participant considering themselves in relation to the other in the context of the relationship.

'Being let in' does have ethical implications. My increasing awareness of practice as sustaining a reflective stance to open exploratory ways of working is a theme that I discuss in many of the narratives. Staying with these ideas, there is also a recognition that conversation can be manipulated, and that in the process of being let in underlying intentions may lead to an attempt to steer towards a particular topic, as in the case of GVA. In other ways, I believe being let in

can make advising more relevant and open. With Tom at Industrial Wheel Co, we did not stay with his initial topic of a need for marketing advice. In inviting reflection and honouring different voices, a number of themes could be explored in conversation rather than from a fixed point of finding a solutions-focused result. In recognising something of Tom's manufacturing context and my experience at CasanCo, the discussion was very different from one that focused on marketing strategy alone. In this relational process, I found that my experience at CasanCo enabled a connection that might not otherwise have been possible, and I recognise awareness of my 'self' in the conversation about Tom's situation. I agree with Palmer-Woodward (2007) when she challenges a view of consultants as 'autonomous, independent, logical individuals who work together and are left unchanged (in identity terms) by the relationship' (ibid: 45). Experience arises in co-created conversation in which we cannot stand outside the relationship and remain unchanged. From this perspective, staying with a reflective stance enables learning to be recognised and to become part of future actions. Stacey (2011:330) argues that it 'focuses attention on aspects of what we are doing together that have been invisible to us'. This resonates with what I call being let in, changing the dynamic of conversation and leading to transformational learning for both adviser and client. This is different from formal diagnostic approaches, or those that advocate online support.

Further exploration of the emergence of identity and role

Cunliffe (2004) suggests that in undertaking narrative research we are talking as much about our own experience as we are talking about the lives of others. Rather than seeing narratives or entrepreneurial stories as fixed bodies of knowledge, by challenging assumptions they shift and take different forms through posing the question 'why?' This opens up themes of temporality, in which taking a reflective approach over time offers new interpretations. The example of a client, Orisa, who I met at a dinner for women in business, is useful in explaining this. I had not seen her for about a year. She gave me a warm welcome, but I was surprised when I heard her enthusiastically telling people at the dinner table that following our meeting she had gone home and cried. In taking up Mead's (1934) view of gesture and response, I am reminded that we can never know what the outcomes of conversation might be when ideas are taken up by others and then ripple out over time. I felt particularly uncomfortable at hearing this, as sitting with us at the table was Tyrone Pinder. He was the main contact between EEDA, the organisation that managed the funding for the advising contract, and the management team at Business Link East. As Orisa talked about our work together this unexpected conflation of client experience and the presence of a policy-representative made me feel quite exposed and vulnerable. I know that I had some concerns about how Tyrone might be thinking about my

practice as an adviser. It does highlight an underlying sense of guilt I felt at the time about taking an alternative approach to my work, such that I was not particularly keen to talk about it openly. I have considered if this may be a further example of gender-based influences on the understanding of practice, particularly as Tyrone was one of the only males in the room. However, I feel that I would have had equal concerns if the person representing EEDA had been female.

Taking responsibility for my reflective approach to practice

As I read now about my reticence to share my practice in the open forum with Orisa and Tyrone I feel more strongly about standing up for this way of working. I can recognise that in the course of this research I have further developed confidence in being open to different ways of working, of which working reflectively with clients is just one. In paying attention to conversational approaches, I am aware of similarities and differences between practices that could, for example, be seen as therapeutic conversation and as related practices of coaching or mentoring. There is no space here to elaborate on these different forms of relationships, as each supports a wide body of literature; however, there are some implications of these concepts that I set out here. Drawing on the development of a therapeutic relationship, Shotter (2008b, 2009) continually questions what is going on when making sense with others. He describes this practice as influencing the kind of person you become in the process, suggesting that this might entail questions of how to become a good listener, a good speaker, a good therapist or, in an organisational context, a good manager (Shotter, 2008b). These are all questions that have consumed me in my reflections on what it is that I am doing when I say I am advising, although in Shotter's work there remains a separation, suggesting an inner, and an outer world (Shotter, 2010). Just as I struggled with whether I should call myself an adviser or a consultant (Chapter 2), similar questions arise in the distinction between coaching and mentoring. D'Abate et al. (2003) talk of these as forms of developmental interaction, and a theme that is common to both coaching and mentoring is that they offer individualised learning rather than something more general, as offered in formal training programmes.

In talking about coaching, De Haan (2005:20) states that the aim is to improve the coachee's professionalism, and in this the 'coach' takes a facilitative role. De Haan goes on to mention that the overall intention of the coach is to release the hidden strengths of the client and remove barriers to further development, implying the coach has some power to bring these outcomes about. Mentoring, on the other hand, has been defined as more of a master–tutor relationship (Russell and Adams, 1997), in which someone more senior will provide support and feedback on particular aspects of another's development. There are similarities in both coaching and

mentoring to the experience of advising, particularly in that there can be learning for both mentor and mentee in the process (Burke et al., 1994). In terms of advising practice, the mutual learning implied has some resonance with all these concepts. In choosing to call something advising, or coaching, or some other categorical description, there is a 'why' question that needs to be addressed. The struggle I had with whether I called myself an adviser or a consultant, or with questions about the difference between coaching and mentoring, changes when these issues are seen as socially constructed in complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2000). As I have been exploring practice I have recognised elements of all these relationships, in how knowledge is continuously reproduced and potentially transformed in processes of interaction between people.

Drawing on social constructionist ideas, Shotter and Cunliffe (2002) suggest that exploring social interaction as being relationally responsive shifts us away from the separation of behaviour (as a causal sequence of events) and action (as an explanation of why we do what we do):

> A radical change is occurring in our attitudes to human enquiry. We are moving away from analysing our surroundings objectively as external observers of static forms of reality, and moving away from studying the activity of others while standing at a distance from them (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2002:16).

These ideas are persuasive and provide an alternative view from which to explore practice. There is commonality between these ideas and those of complex responsive processes of relating in the exploration of human relating. Similarly, Hosking and Pluut (2010) talk of reflexive dialogue as opening up new ways of going on together and as being a way of constructing self–other differentiation:

> Reflexive dialogues, directed at the research process, can open up new ways of going on together by mobilising local knowledges and communally reflecting on research identities and relations (Hosking and Pluut, 2010:71).

This has some resonance with the idea of sustaining reflective conversation, and I can see that what they say about research could also be directed towards my narratives and reflections on work with clients. However, I am also aware of a limitation to the ideas of social construction implied in this approach, particularly in the treatment of 'the individual' and 'the social'. When Hosking and Pluut (ibid.) are suggesting communal local understanding, a sense of the simultaneous relationship between local and global influences as reflected in Chapter 7 does not necessarily develop. From a complexity perspective, reflexivity offers increased awareness

of what we are doing with others and how this is shifting and changing as we make sense of a particular experience.

A further consideration of increased reflexivity is the treatment of ethical issues, which Hosking and Pluut (2010) see as the relational responsibility arising in the communal process of reflection. This reflects the presence of a shared understanding of ethics and of acting towards the good of the situation. There is, however, a difference, in that the relation between individual and social means that we cannot separate ethics from the responsibility of the actions that we make as individual selves. Through the work of Stacey (2001), Mead (1934) and Elias (1971), I understand that ethics emerges in relational processes. However, as Griffin (2005) suggests, taking a communal or generalised view of ethics, following a Kantian categorical view of morality, is to overlook that we all have some responsibility for the situations that we are acting into. Paying attention to what is happening in the present is an essential aspect of reflection, and of ethical practice. Mowles (2015:168) adds the proviso that reflexivity does not automatically lead to the good and 'can also disrupt, provoking feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety'.

In reflecting further on differences between social constructionist perspectives and complex responsive processes of relating, there is some agreement that reflexivity in research and practice can open up the possibility of space for power relations to be discussed (Hosking and Pluut, 2010). Hosking (2011:48) suggests that 'the emphasis is on facilitating "power to" go on in different but equal relations', a view supported by Cunliffe (2004). This view suggests that narrative enquiry should not be seen as privileging one voice above others, as power is something that can be equalised. This is different to how others such as Elias understand power as arising in a relative need for each other. While the idea of facilitating different voices to be heard is one that I reflect on in this research, I challenge the idea that we can move towards a sense of equal power. Power, therefore, is not something that one person can control, and this reflects a difference with the power themes taken up in social constructionism. Burkitt (1993), drawing on Elias and Foucault, sees power not as something that can be possessed, but as relational. In a similar way, Stacey (2007a), drawing on Elias' view of power arising in the enabling–constraining process of sustaining relationships, suggests that power balance will be tilted in favour of some or against others. Flyvbjerg (2004:285) talks of this as crucial to developing practical wisdom, which involves:

> not only appreciative judgements in terms of values but also an understanding of the practical political realities of any situation as part of an integrated judgement in terms of power (Flyvbjerg, 2004:285).

I recognise that business advising is enabled and constrained by the communicative interdependency of many participants in the advising process. Holding space for reflection requires mutuality as this process is dynamically sustained through shifting power relations. In talking of advising as holding space for reflective conversation this is not something that the adviser can undertake to achieve alone. This relates to the business contexts in which business owners and entrepreneurs are continually in relation with others:

> From this perspective, learning can be considered as a continuous flow of social processes as a result of the numerous connections and interactions between practitioners operating in the SME community, as they negotiate and re-negotiate their practices. (Higgins and Mirza, 2012:5)

This is important when considering advising as a social process, and I now explore this further in relation to planning for a start-up enterprise.

A relational view of supporting an entrepreneurial start-up

The move from Business Link in 2010 removed me from contractual constraints and the responsibility of finding clients. I shifted full time into teaching across a wide range of business modules. It became apparent that in the mainstream teaching on business, with the exception of specific entrepreneurship subjects (which I was not involved with teaching), there was very little discussion of small firms. In general, I found that in the early years I did not say much about my experience when I was teaching, because it seemed so far removed from the case studies and management theories that pervaded the textbooks.

After moving into this new academic career, I was invited to a meeting by a colleague. I was not sure what it was about. I walked in halfway through the meeting, as I had just finished teaching. Feeling a bit flustered, I tried to get a sense of the ongoing conversation and to pick up fragments of information as the meeting went on. I pieced together that it was about a project to write an 'investment-ready business plan'. The meeting was attended by Jan Filosof, my colleague, Roger Brown, who was involved in business engagement, and Elaine Markham, a senior academic who had an idea for an entrepreneurial spin-off business based on her research. By the end of the meeting, I sensed that because of my work with small firms there was an expectation that I would follow up with Elaine. I felt the pressure of expectation. Nothing was said directly but I assumed this was what Roger and Jan had intended by inviting me to the meeting in the first place. I was thinking, 'what *if I were to say no … how might this be perceived'?* My identity as someone with credible experience of small business was caught up in the decision that I felt I needed to make.

In this situation, I was faced with different facets of advising that challenged my view of self. I know that I was feeling exposed. Thinking this through, in working with Business Link clients, I had evolved my practice to be facilitative, supporting and signposting, without having much responsibility for specific outcomes. I was less familiar with taking on a consultancy project in the form of a role that seemed to require an 'expert' providing the artefact of a planning document. There was a tension between responding to my anxiety by saying 'no' to the project and what I thought others might say if I withdrew at this stage. I agreed to speak to Elaine again and to have a further exploratory conversation. I wrote about this situation in a conference paper (Andrews, 2012), as I tried to make sense of how Elaine and I were working together and how, from a messy, conflictual, conversational process, a successful 'investment-ready business plan' emerged. In the paper, I developed three interconnected narratives and I draw on each of these here.

Theme one – finding ways to 'go on' in the planning process

Elaine and I agreed to meet at her office a few weeks later. The initial discussion was a chance to find out the scope of what was expected. Very early on, I realised that there were a number of issues needing to be addressed. This first meeting set the pace for many meetings to follow. I arrived and asked for Elaine at reception. She was not there. The receptionist assured me that she would appear, so I sat and waited. Before long, she arrived in a flurry of activity. I followed her up to her room where she proceeded to undertake at least four different activities at once, checking emails, texting, eating a sandwich and getting me a glass of water. I have always thought of myself as having high energy, but it seemed that Elaine never rested. In thinking about this as a relational process, I did not feel noticed nor did I initially have the sense of 'feeling felt' (Siegel, 2008, Johnson et al., 2008), but I waited and eventually Elaine sat down. Although I did not have a well-formed idea of what we would talk about in the meeting, I followed my familiar process of asking open questions to give me some sense of the business idea and what Elaine expected from me in this process. I started to take notes as our discussion got going. Something struck me as important. Elaine told me very clearly that she 'knew nothing about business' and that she would not need to be involved in the planning process, as she would be 'engaging the services of a manager' to run the business once the planning document was completed. I became extremely uncomfortable with this idea, and with her view of disengaging from the planning process.

There was a dilemma for me in knowing how to work with Elaine. Firstly, I was unsure of my own ability in delivering what was required in relation to the creation of an investment-ready business plan. I confidently called myself a 'business adviser' leading up to this project, but

now I questioned my ability to carry out this role successfully. Secondly, Elaine's stepping back from running the business really worried me. I felt that providing a plan without her fundamental engagement in the process was not only unlikely to give her what she wanted; it also went against everything that I had experienced in running my own business.

I also understood that Elaine was very busy and had limited time to spend talking about the planning process. Her view was that as she had funding to *pay* someone to do the plan why would she need to get involved? This is not an uncommon view. Literature on planning and small firms suggests that:

> since there are costs of planning, entrepreneurs must also be able to assess the value, in order to decide when to plan themselves, when to purchase planning from an expert or a new team member, and when to skip planning altogether (Chwolka and Raith, 2011:396).

Chwolka and Raith's view could suggest that 'buying in' planning is a normative activity. I disagree vehemently with this statement, particularly when the plan was to be presented to a funding panel at some point. At Business Link, we had been involved occasionally in reviewing planning documents for business-angel or venture capital funding, where often those seeking funding failed to achieve it because they did not understand the figures they were presenting. I therefore knew of the challenges facing an entrepreneur questioned about a 'plan' which they had no idea how to answer because they had not written it.

I was not the only provider being considered. Elaine had received a quote for the work from Exemplas (the company that I had originally worked for on the Business Link contract) based on daily rates, and she told me that they had allocated two to three days to write the plan. This created more concerns as I could not imagine what depth of planning might be achieved in such a short timescale. I could have walked away, enabling Elaine to follow up on the quote, but in my heart, and in my mind, I knew that this would leave her vulnerable, particularly in an investor meeting where every detail of the plan would be questioned. I also recognised that, surprisingly, this had become for me a competitive process, and the quote from Exemplas made me keener to promote myself as the 'ideal' candidate in the face of the alternatives. In addition, I did not want to let my colleagues down and so, despite my concerns, as the meeting progressed I stayed open to the idea of taking on the work.

Planning and the evolution of a convincing entrepreneurial narrative

Initially I was not thinking about the planning process but more about how I could encourage Elaine to consider her role in the process should she decide to work with me rather than Exemplas. At this early stage, the embryonic business was a collection of ideas based on potential support from a medically based research programme for patients. In our initial conversation about the programme and the results of a pilot study I sensed Elaine's passion, and I could see how this was an innovative and exciting opportunity. I spoke of my concerns about how handing over the responsibility for the 'investment-ready plan' without her input might lead to problems, and I was pleased when she agreed to work with me.

Before the second meeting, I wrote up my notes and sent them to Elaine. Something I soon became aware of was that, unlike many clients, Elaine was a 'responder'. She emailed back with ideas, corrections and suggestions at all times of the day and night. I also realised that she was very quick at understanding the complexities of the business process. It was not long before Elaine started to bring business-related questions and suggestions to the discussion. She was challenging me for responses and this led to increased vitality in discussion when we had our face-to-face meetings. A significant influence on these early meetings was Elaine's insistence that she needed a 'flyer' by the end of July for a conference. We could not create flyers for the business without a company name. This led to us thinking about a 'brand'. I remember thinking that this process was like putting together a jigsaw without a picture – was this in the original brief for writing the plan? This was not writing the planning document; however, the process of exploring these artefacts gave us more to discuss, and influenced how we were putting the document together. This process made the ideas more tangible. We needed someone to help with the marketing to design the flyer and to create a logo that would represent the company. In similarity to the Business Link 'brokerage' model process, I suggested a meeting with Elaine and Thomas Johnston (the consultant discussed in Chapter 6), someone I trusted and who had experience in this area.

The meeting with Elaine and Thomas was fraught. Elaine and I had developed a way of working that worked for us, and I am reminded that these ways of working often take time to evolve. Thomas's relaxed, consultative style clashed with Elaine's approach, and she was quite dismissive. We started to brainstorm names and, rather than seeing this as a free and open opportunity to explore potential names, Elaine was frustrated and pushed back at anything she felt did not reflect her 'vision' for her business. In facilitating this discussion, bringing together different individuals with the purpose of working together, I am reminded that it is not possible to control the outcomes of these processes. I have drawn on Mead (1934) and Siegel (2016)

and their views of human beings as inherently social, and I have spoken about being let in as a feeling, a sense of interconnectedness, resonance or attunement, with an 'other'. There was little sense of attunement between Elaine and Thomas in the tension of this meeting. At one point Elaine abruptly left to go to her computer, leaving Thomas and me alone. She became engaged with looking up words she would like to include in the company name, pragmatically checking what words were being used by other companies but without including us in this process. The meeting ended with some ideas but no actual name to put on the flyers.

In our next few emails, Elaine and I explored different versions of the names. A name stuck and there was a sense of the business coming into being: Channels4Health. Suddenly it was as if having a name gave us something more tangible on which to pin this business idea and focus us in on the business-planning process. The conversation became increasingly dynamic and I had the sense that the business was becoming an entity from our fragmented thoughts and ideas. It was coming to life on the pages of the plan and in our conversation. I can relate this to a 'movement of sense-making' (Shaw 2002:172) in which initial conversation led on to much deeper understanding of what we might do next. Later, in discussion and reflecting on our work together, Elaine commented on the planning process as giving her a '*concretising of my vision for the company'.*

I now stepped up to take responsibility for the planning document. This was planning with a purpose, and very early on I identified a potential investor. I learned from discussions with Russell, one of the funding panel members, that, while they might be interested, we had a long way to go before we would get to a plan that represented a legitimate business opportunity the panel might choose to invest in. There was a structure they required, and this would act as both a constraint but also as an enabler for focusing on particular aspects of the business. This structure included working out what level of funding Elaine would require, what the funding would cover and how the company would operate. These would all need to be included in the plan, together with three years of projected figures.

The topic of business planning is considered a fertile field for entrepreneurial research (Brinckmann et al., 2010). In the literature, there is no consensus on the benefits of planning. The literature on planning for new ventures sets out a debate about whether to plan or not to plan. For some this is seen as a fruitful activity (Delmar and Shane, 2003) and for others it is one that wastes time (Lange et al., 2005). What is evident is that the majority of the research takes a linear view of this process, making comparisons between what was intended and what happened in practice to support conclusions either way. This is another example of how we can

lose the 'jagged character' of practice (Schatzki et al., 2005) when we write up formally this type of work. What I find lacking in this literature are the messy and contested processes that lead up to creating the artefact of a formal plan: the complex responsive processes that happen as we negotiate, challenge and put together the plan.

As week after week went by with many emails between us, I began to see that this was a very time-consuming and challenging process. I have since wondered how this would have worked in the 'two day' consultancy model of the other quote. The formal process of preparing the planning document required an adherence to institutional expectations. I spent a long time researching what the key ingredients of an 'investment-ready business plan' looked like. I put together spreadsheets for costings and profit and loss accounts, exploring the potential business outcomes for the required three years. However, these figures were dynamic, changing on an hour-by-hour basis, at times based on the conversation going on at the time. In the end, I set up connected formulae, where changing one figure would dynamically influence the profitability figure. This was something I had done with the cash flow spreadsheet I had been so pleased with at CasanCo many years before. I could increase or decrease profitability figures on the spreadsheet, depending on the information that Elaine provided, or my mood. The business-planning process represents both the formal output – the planning document itself – but also a vehicle for mutual recognition in the intensive and responsive dialogue through which we were both learning and building understanding together. In challenging her assumptions, I also raised her awareness of what running a business would be about beyond the plan, which she had not previously considered. The ever-growing list of demands, premises, staff, research and other costs far exceeded any potential profit, and structured how we put together the pricing for the programme. This in-depth thinking about potential for the future meant that the planning document eventually came together, and at the same time Elaine was becoming prepared for the meeting with the investment panel.

To give us more local knowledge about the way the panel worked, I suggested a meeting with Russell from the funding panel. I wrote up my thoughts when I came out of the meeting. Like the meeting with Thomas, there were some tensions:

> ***Elaine Markham/Russell Corbett meeting*** *- I have spent the past 3 hours in a meeting with Elaine and Russell. I am aware that part of the reason I am still involved is because I seem to be able to facilitate the discussion and keep things moving. Elaine and Russell have a distrust of each other. Elaine mentioned she feels Russell is trying to take control and somehow that will mean that the*

funding organisation will have too much power in the development of this business idea. She has not fully thought through the fact that the panel are likely to invest £40k in the business they therefore should have some sort of power in this situation. Russell on the other hand has confided in me that he feels that Elaine doesn't understand important aspects of the investment process. He tells me that she keeps coming up with things he isn't expecting and he is unsettled by this. He comments that the funders have certain rights over IP that Elaine chooses to ignore or brush off. He tells me this needs to be discussed but it did not come up today.

Again, shifting power relations come to mind. I felt locked in a battle. I was not just writing up the plan, but becoming a mediator in this wider process. Convening a conversation in which Elaine and Russell could meet to discuss their perspectives then lead to them separately sharing their frustrations with me. I particularly note Russell's concern about making changes to the plan, suggesting his assumption that we could have some level of predictability for a business that did not even exist at that time. It was like holding threads of conversation together, with the aspirations and intentions of different individuals (including me) vying for attention at the same time.

Working together to get the business ideas into a format that could be put into a plan to be shown to potential investors was a dynamic process of stability and instability happening at the same time. I knew it would be important for Elaine to present a 'convincing narrative' of the business to the panel. Nothing was fixed, and yet we needed to bring this process together into a planning document from which a panel could decide if this 'business', that existed so far only in conversation and on paper, might be worthy of their funding.

Theme two – we like the plan so much we are not going to fund it ... yet!

A date was arranged and although I did not attend, I felt that my reputation was caught up in the result. Elaine felt that the meeting had gone well but it was some time before a response came back from the panel. She reminded the panel several times. In the absence of a confirmation, I began to assume the worst. When it came, it was neither the 'yes, go ahead', nor the 'no, we don't think this will work', we had expected. We had set out the plan to build confidence in an embryonic business that as yet existed only on paper, and our planning narrative had been so successful it seemed to have the power to allay the panel's anxieties regarding its future promise. To our surprise, Elaine was offered a smaller amount of funding which would support a 'faster roll-out' in a scaled-up version of the plan. Mowles (2011:91)

suggests that there is value in 'paying attention to the ways in which we get caught up in fantasy-driven things and behaviour' in order to become more reality-congruent about our daily lives. The panel's decision took us back to the drawing board. What would a scaled-up version of the business be like? How would we manage a faster roll-out of something that existed only in conversation and in the words we had written into the formal plan? Mead's (1934) concept of social object once again resonates here. We were acting into the expectations and understandings of others as if the business already existed!

We updated the planning document, using the spreadsheet to explore what different combinations of costs and pricing looked like. I took responsibility for the figures, thinking about what the panel would look for. I decided that, as the most likely purchaser was a large public institution, they would be late payers. I built this into my figures and in the spreadsheet in year two the business showed a cash flow problem for a few months. I thought this would reflect a sense of what might happen once the business was launched, but it would have been just as easy to change the figures to show a profit. In the end, I kept them in and set it up so that these showed up in red.

In January 2012, there was a follow-up meeting with the panel. With her colleague Patricia, who had been involved latterly in the business formation, Elaine led the presentation. They were both excellent. I sat there feeling proud that when panel members asked a number of challenging questions, Elaine and Patricia responded with an authority that had not been present at the start of the planning process. I recognised that Elaine's business knowledge, and the answers they had received to all their questions, had impressed the panel. It came to my turn to present the figures. I stood up at the end of the long boardroom table and I went through the figures with the highlights on the large screen behind me. The finance director interrupted and asked if I could explain '*the situation where the cash flow goes into the red'*. In that moment, my heart felt as if it was sinking, my private conversation asking why I allowed the figures to go into the red when I could easily have changed the figures so that everything was black. It was a horrible few minutes. I started to explain about my theory of late payments, without saying that it was based on nothing other than ideas and thoughts of what the projected future *might* look like. The finance director agreed that going into the red reflected a realistic view of cash flow: '*would you find some additional funding useful to deal with this predicted shortfall in the form of an additional loan that would be similar to an overdraft if needed?'* I realised in that moment that our business plan had succeeded in reflecting a realism and a level of confidence to the panel that surpassed our expectations. Elaine and Patricia were offered the

increased funding to start trading. I considered that, after many months, my work on the plan was at last finished.

Theme three – the end is just the beginning

Nevertheless, the map is not the territory and the next stage was the shareholder negotiation process. My involvement in the plan was now complete. Elaine and I spoke about my being involved in shareholder negotiations, but I knew this was not my area of expertise. However, having got this far with the project, I felt that I should be able to help in some way. Thinking through my contacts, I tried to find someone I felt I could trust, and that would not come with a price tag too high for Elaine's limited resources. Samuel Crawford came to mind. In 2003, he and I started on the same day as advisers for Exemplas. While he had driven me mad with all the pedantic detail he would bring to any discussion, particularly in team meetings, I knew that he would never back down if he thought he was right. My introduction of Thomas and Russell had not been without issues. Here, I felt that Samuel's experience could be useful to Elaine, but I was not sure if they would get on. I told Samuel of my concerns for Elaine and he agreed to an initial discussion on shareholder negotiations – with no fee. I stepped back from my involvement in the company as Samuel continued to work with Elaine, becoming her (very) critical friend. A lot happened in getting the business from shareholder deal to income generation but this is not specifically relevant to this research. Thankfully, the business began to trade.

The end of the planning activity that I had been involved with was the beginning of activities that we could never have put in the plan. I bumped into Elaine one day. She gave me an update on how difficult it was to keep the business going. They were seeking contracts in the NHS: '*I know they call it the National Health Service but it should be called the local health service*' she told me. NHS policy had shifted funding to clinical commissioning groups (CCGs). Each one had responsibility for a small amount of the overall purchasing of services such as Elaine's programme. Getting through the door to find someone responsible for purchasing was difficult and frustrating. Once in front of doctors, Elaine and Patricia could respond to questions on the fine detail of how the programme worked, but they needed to develop leads before this could happen. The doctors who would be referring patients were not the purchasers: they were in the CCG. This aspect of the business was not in the plan. It reminds me that it is only in the operationalising of the plan that this type of learning evolves. It can be reflected on by paying attention to how such learning is taken up in each local conversation. This point is missing from much of the literature on planning. Delmar and Shane (2003:1183) suggest that 'given the evidence that our study unearthed about the value of planning, future research on new ventures

should examine the relative importance of planning as a process and plans as an outcome'. What this does not reflect is what happens after the planning process and why the lived experience might differ from what was chosen *a priori*. There is little recognition on how the initial outcomes of the plan evolve and change unpredictably.

This case of planning for investment offers a narrative interpretation of how the content of the plan was conveyed to the panel. A research project that explored the topic of funding identified what the authors called the communication of inauthentic narratives in seeking funding, asking '*do the stories they tell get them the money they need?'* (Martens et al., 2007). There is a gap in the current research literature in terms of focusing on the role of the entrepreneur through examining the effects of both the content and the *source* of entrepreneurial narratives. I draw on the start-up narrative to explore how the format of a business-planning document is highly structured, presenting a rationalised and linear timeline of business activities that leads to success. Producing the document, however, was messy and featured conflict and negotiation. Writing a plan for a business that was yet to produce income required a lot of muddling through, piecing together the ideas and actions from which eventually we would be able to present to a funding panel. This was very different to the way the plan was communicated to the funding panel, reflecting how different intentions influence our decisions as they play out together. These tensions are paradoxical, in the sense that little of what was 'planned' came to fruition while other things that were unplanned became important to the business's activities once launched.

By focusing on planning practice, researchers into phronetic planning explore taken-for-granted 'truths' about the progressive and rational promise of planning (Flyvbjerg, 2004). The creation of the plan was like a guessing game around which figures would look 'right' to the panel but also made sense to us – I think this is why the plan rang true to the panel. In practice, however, the plan emerged from a complex game which was caught up with others and their intentions. While we had met the stringent formalities of the funding panel, what is rarely explored in these situations is how we are all caught up and invested in 'the game', in the way that Elias and Bourdieu talk about in terms of 'habitus'. This idea of 'the game' is one that we were immersing ourselves in as we worked on the project, with no separation between planning then action. Mowles (2011:60) poses a number of questions about what this means in relation to practice:

> If there is no place to stand 'outside' of what is going on using idealisations and abstractions, how is it possible to form a view about how to act? On what basis is a leader planning and intervening in an organisation to bring about

changes? Is a rejection of the idea that an organisation is a system equivalent to saying that there is no point in making plans?

In addressing the question, I believe that this challenges what we were doing in the enabling constraints of the planning process. We would not have achieved such a deep understanding without the formalities of the planning process. We needed to be able to articulate the concept of organisation without it 'being' an entity. I would argue that the fluidity of these processes makes it difficult to come to any specific conclusions that are directly transferable to a future company or to investor decision making in relation to planning based on this specific experience. However, paying attention to these patterns of human relating gives an understanding of planning as arising in negotiation, and of learning processes that are complex, temporal and locally situated. In reflecting on how we were responding to the conditions of the funding panel, it is clear that we were caught up in a game. I can recognise how we were acting into the primacy of planning and predictability in the management literature, as well as into the demands of the funding process.

Summary of key ideas - what sense am I making of practice now?

I am arguing for advising to be recognised as a process of sustaining reflective conversation, while at the same time, I am aware of the challenges I have faced in taking this practice seriously. In drawing on the situation with Tyrone and Orisa, these tensions became clear to me, and taking time to reflect on this has shown me that in the other narratives here I am more comfortable with staying with this way of working. As reflected in the narratives about Trevor and about the work with Elaine, it can be seen that we each come to these situations with our own histories and leave with something that comes from being part of the lived experience of being together in a particular place and time. I believe that encouraging reflective practice brings a more responsive perspective to business advising where this also evokes emotions. This is the local context of advice, although, as with the client–adviser relationship with Orisa, it is impossible to know how the advice process will influence what happens in future actions. In reflecting on the narratives throughout this work, I am mindful that my practice is shifting and changing in the everyday experience of working with others.

Advising does not take place as isolated or discrete moments in time. Each conversation arises as the intertwining of the experience and anticipations of all participants. There are broader global influences that we can never predict, such as the challenges Trevor faced when the business activity spiked in response to the book launches. There are also the influences of our socialisation that cannot be understood unless they are shared and explored in relation to the

situations under discussion. With Trevor, his background in corporate management was an enabling and constraining aspect of how he was tackling his current business challenges. With Elaine, I have talked of how we were acting into the enabling constraints of planning as a social object, which leads to a tendency to act in particular ways. These are examples of how as an adviser 'I' am caught up in interdependent interactions and shifting power relating as these themes play out. I do not feel that this is 'power to' do something that lies outside mutuality or that there is a communal sense of the right way to act or what might happen next. I have to take responsibility for encouraging open and exploratory conversation, responding to what is coming up as I experience advising constructed in the living present. I am influencing, and influenced by, local and global patterns, and I will bring these ideas together in the final chapter.

Chapter 9 Conclusions and contributions of the research

Introduction

As I bring this thesis to a close I am mindful of the importance of the question that I started with – what is it that I am doing when I say I am advising? While the major focus of the research began with the exploration of business advising, in addressing my research question, a number of themes have arisen that develop a deeper understanding of advising as practice. By highlighting those aspects of advising that reflect organisational activity as complex, non-linear processes I am arguing for a view that challenges mainstream models of advising. In taking a reflexive narrative approach, new meanings for adviser and client arise in what I now understand as a temporal process. Rather than advising being understood as taking place on a linear timeline of past, present and future, I claim that advising practice is co-created, arising in the turn-taking and turn-making of everyday conversation, power relating and ethics. In paying attention to practice taking place in the 'living present' (Shaw, 2002), conversation itself can be seen as self-organising, as themes are developed, dropped, diverted, interrupted and subsequently revived in other situations (Noble, 1999). This means that advising conversation will be responsive to the evolving context of the client situation, and will enable experience of adviser and client to inform the advising process. This understanding of advising as ongoing conversation is largely overlooked in the advising literature, particularly in the context of government-funded support, and small organisations. In the following sections, I will summarise my current thinking about advising practice, setting out the main themes of my thesis and highlighting the conclusions and contributions of the research.

Exploring advising from the perspective of practice

I began exploring my experience of advising with the recurring theme that it seemed to be 'all about conversations' (Chapter 3). The idea that advising was conversational stayed with me, but it also concerned me. I looked for some justification or confirmation to support the legitimacy of what I was doing as an adviser, often comparing myself to other advisers who were mostly male and from a corporate background. Colin (Chapter 2), who often spoke of his own corporate experience, had reinforced my fears when he had criticised my way of working following a joint visit to a client. This may have had some influence on why at first I talked about my practice pejoratively as being 'flaky' (Chapter 2), as there was little in the advising literature that supported my approach. However, on several occasions, these same advisers had mentioned chance meetings with clients I had worked with. I sensed their surprise as they asked me what it was that I was doing, as it appeared that generally my clients talked with enthusiasm

about our meetings. I was not able to say what 'it' was, but I would think '*well, all I am doing is just talking to them*!' If I *was* 'just talking' what did that mean?

The concerns I felt about my approach stemmed from the sense that my way of working did not fit with the targets, the monitoring, the information gathering and the data that we were required to provide in our everyday work. There was a difference between the predictability of these linear activities, and the exploratory, and often energised, non-linear conversation that I experienced with clients. I was aware that taking this conversational approach could bring about new understandings that would often surprise me and the client. I have noted (Chapter 2) that, despite a lack of confidence in my approach, I did not heed Colin's advice '*to get to the point because that is what these business owners want*'. My response was not to stand up to him and justify my approach, but to choose not to undertake further joint visits. This meant that, regardless of concerns, I continued to work in the way that worked for me, staying with the messy, uncertain questioning process. However, I continued to feel at times that this conversational approach seemed at odds with more structured, diagnostic approaches.

Having made the decision to take up a reflective, narrative approach in this research (Chapter 3), the research process entailed working closely with the PhD group, whose individual members were encouraged to share their writing with each other. I began to think about particular client meetings that would strike me as being of interest, and I began to write these up, initially to help me make sense of what I was doing when I was advising. These became the first explorations into advising experience. I came to recognise that opportunities to learn are increased in drawing on the diverse ideas and experience of others (Antonacopoulou and Chiva, 2007). In this environment, sharing my narratives opened up new ways of thinking. This process led to lively discussions. Elkjaer (2008) suggests that the separation of thinking and acting prevents learning taking place in an informed or intelligent way, and this resonates with the American pragmatist John Dewey's (1938) suggestion that we are shaping and are shaped by experience. As I recognised the similarities between advising practice and research practice (Chapter 3), my focus shifted onto practice itself as the subject of enquiry, rather than pursuing advising and researching as two interconnected but different activities.

Working in these ways led to questions that I was unable to address. In the group, I had been asked why I thought that 'this' or 'that' happened? What led me to draw conclusions about my working with clients in a particular way? On what basis was I challenging the prevailing view of advising? How did I understand my approach compared to that of other researchers/writers? These questions were unsettling and often frustrating, as they were not easy to answer, reflecting that we can say a lot about our 'self' in what we do not say, as well as in what we do

say. In responding to these questions, however, themes arose unexpectedly about my experience prior to taking up the role of adviser that I had not previously considered, giving me the opportunity to explore a broader sense of what I understood by my 'practice'. This reflects how narratives can help to increase understanding of meaning created through interactions with others (Higgins et al., 2013b). I began to think, and talk, about how my experience of small-business activity at CasanCo, and working there with a Business Link adviser, Jonathan (Appendix 1), had influenced particular choices when I later worked with clients.

I had met Jonathan at a workshop he ran at the Business Link office, at which he had introduced his 'value-added spreadsheet'. The way he promoted this led me to believe that it might be used to address many of the challenges I was facing. He did nothing to dissuade me from the belief that that my problems could be addressed with his support. Mole (2004) makes a connection between advising practice and systems-based approaches, and suggests that monitoring and feedback processes are crucial to stabilising a firm. When business advising draws on an abstracted view of organisation, understood as a type of system, it supports the idea of adviser activity as an intervention in this system. This suggestion of moving toward a particular point of stability is one that I am uncomfortable with as systems-based approaches fail to recognise the inherent social complexity of organisational activity. I came to recognise that my dissatisfaction with working with Jonathan was related to what I felt was the unfulfilled promise of systems-based thinking. Jonathan's adherence to his value-added spreadsheet meant that, despite my questions, there had been a lack of discussion about what was happening in the day-to-day situation at CasanCo.

The journals that I had written prior to becoming an adviser became an additional source of learning, offering a fragmented but insightful view of my thinking from a particular time. Although my journals had not been written as research diaries, (Riessman, 2008) they had served a purpose of giving me a chance to write in a way that was like having a conversation with myself. In reading them many years later, they enabled me to develop a more nuanced understanding; a further conversation that unexpectedly offered something of a longitudinal view of experience through reading about CasanCo and my work with Business Link. In reading the journals, I became aware of feelings of blame directed towards myself, but also towards Jonathan, as, despite his promises, the support he offered had not been able to save the company from closure. The starkness of the writing strikes me when I read about how the relationship had culminated in Jonathan walking away when he found out that I was to close the company:

Yesterday Jonathan came in – saw what the options were and left – forever.
I feel so relieved … he was beginning to get me down.[11]

Reading about Jonathan walking away felt like letting me in to feelings from that time that had been long forgotten. I had invited Jonathan to work with me, and for over a year we met monthly and discussed opportunities to improve the business situation. However, reflecting on how I felt I was often relegated to a passive client role that I rarely challenged may suggest something of why I favoured a more open approach when I worked with clients. Over the progress of the research, an alternative narrative that resonated more closely with experience of my practice began to take shape. I recognised that I had enabled this power differential (Stacey, 2003a) to be sustained. This formed the basis for further reflection and exploration that helped me to deepen the meaning of experience and its significance to my evolving practice. I realised that I would not want my clients to feel the way that I had at times, where it seemed I was being given a prescription for action rather than options that were open for discussion.

Clients often sought help when they were feeling concerned about their situation. I was reminded that I had sought business advice when I was struggling to bring about changes to the business as a way of addressing decreased profitability. It was in talking with others in the PhD group, and in being able to access thoughts and feelings from the journals, that I gained a deeper sense of practice arising in these conversational processes. By recognising the emergent nature of advice and research, I understand that knowledge can be seen to be always in the process of becoming, reflecting that in encouraging an exploratory approach there will always be a sense of incompleteness when drawing conclusions (Craig, 2009). It was these processes that I was bringing into my work with clients.

I began to reflect on what led to my taking up the advising role in 2003, not long after I had experienced the closure of the family business (Appendix 1). Closing down the company had been an anxious time, and initially I found it difficult to reflect upon. I felt emotionally vulnerable, and hesitant to share this experience with others. It was hard to admit that I felt responsible for not being able to keep the business going. Stacey (2005a:113) makes the point that in paying attention to the evolution of the self there is 'no separation between the job role and individual selves'. The experience at CasanCo had left me without a job, and with a sense of failure that was hard to live with. In reflecting on the narratives, I could often empathise with the situations of others, getting a sense of emotions that came with the challenges they were facing in their everyday lives that resonated with my own experience. Stacey (2005c) draws on

[11] 20/08/2002 Light purple book

the work of Elias (2000) relating to the civilising process, suggesting that our perceptions of how others may respond to us can lead to the concealing of aspects of experience, sustained by the social processes of shame. I had written about similar identity issues with clients, such as Frank (Chapter 4) initially concealing his anxiety about what he considered to be his lack of management skills. Similarly, for Gerald at TNN (Chapter 6) the loss of the contract that had been the main family income must have challenged his sense of identity in the context of the family. In the process of reflecting, I now recognise that I was not an observer of these situations, but participating in processes that are simultaneously social and individual. I did not recognise these aspects at the time, but in reflecting on these particular situations I can see why they struck me as important as they involved deeply felt emotions. I recognised further challenges to identity in the situation at CasanCo with James Sparrow (Chapter 4) and his distrust of computers and comments about 'Japanese junk' and how I was caught up in this tension.

In claiming that advising involves emotions, I am challenging the prevailing view of the mainstream literature that sustains an abstracted understanding detached from local experience. Burkitt (2012) suggests that emotion is the source of all our thinking, through our relations to the world and the people we are in relation with. For me, experience of advising and researching meant I was able to openly explore themes of failure and success, calling out emotions related to the CasanCo experience. This view of advising contrasts with the commonly held perspective of the adviser's role as reflected in the description below:

> The delivery of advice is a joint process between client and advisor. It involves the client providing information, briefing and specification of how they perceive their wants, which is then tailored and refined in discussion with the advisor (Bennett, 2007:438).

The language Bennett uses follows linear assumptions, with the client setting out their wants for the adviser to act upon in order to 'deliver' satisfactory advice. This is a common understanding of business advising, particularly in government-funded business support. It is this view that I am challenging, where advisers are talked of as undertaking interventions in organisational systems, and where expert knowledge can be transferred from adviser to client (Bennett and Robson, 2005, Mole, 2002a, Rigby and Ramlogan, 2013, Summon, 1998). I struggle to recognise myself in this description of a role that I undertook for seven years.

There is little sense in this mainstream view that advising is a social process in which a sense of mutuality brings increased connection and energy to conversation. There is also little

recognition of the way that, in the midst of conversation, perceived problems can evolve and shift as they are explored, along with possible ways to address them. However, as I demonstrate in the narratives, as emotions are evoked an individual can be left vulnerable and open to judgement and so this is not a straightforward process. This reflects an ethical dimension of practice. Through the work of Stacey (2001), Mead (1934) and Elias (1971), I understand ethics as relational, where active participation with others raises questions of ethics and power (Mowles, 2015). This is different from the communal or generalised view of ethics that follows a Kantian categorical view of morality. In exploring interdependencies, all participants have some responsibility for the situations into which they are acting.

Advising arising as processes of resistance and recognition

It has not been easy to articulate the unpredictability and the intangible experience of advising. However, in the reflective process of sharing experience in the PhD group, I noted that particular terms, such as practice as 'just talking' and the related idea of meaning arising 'in conversation', continued to be useful to me. These themes recurred in many forms in the narratives, along with other terms that conveyed a form of shorthand for a particular feelings that emerged in the conversational process. One of these was the idea of 'being let in', together with the contrasting sense of 'stuckness'. I came to use the term 'being let in' to express a way of articulating something that signified a sense of negotiating a way forward that could lead to a shift to a more open way of working. An example of this was present in my narrative of the meeting with Peter (Chapter 2). There is often a sense of 'tiptoeing' around in the opening minutes with a client, giving the opportunity for sensing threads of ideas that might take off and lead to a more engaged dialogue. Peter told me in the first few minutes of our conversation that he had previously chosen *not* to work with Business Link advisers. Peter's attitude felt like a barrier to open conversation, carrying a sense of stuckness or resistance to opening up exploratory themes. I was surprised by Peter's comment, and what came into my mind at the time was an anxious question: *'did this mean he would choose not to work with me either'*? I will never know what it was that made my meeting with Peter different from others he had had, but somehow, through conversation, we found themes that helped us to find a way to go on together.

In another first meeting, the conversation with Frank (Chapter 4), I wrote of how I became increasingly frustrated as he continually paced the floor, walked in and out of the factory, and closed down my 'advising' questions. This was an example of the unpredictability of advising conversation. The initial questioning process often encourages clients to talk about their business openly. Frank did not respond to the '*tell me about your business*' sort of questions in

the way I had expected. With Frank, nothing seemed to make a difference. Siegel (2010) uses the expression 'feeling felt', which he suggests is an experience that is felt in the body, resonating or attuning to how we are feeling in relation to others. I felt that this was what was lacking in conversation with Frank. I have suggested above that I now have an awareness that a reason for Frank's distractedness may have been his anxiety in sharing his concerns about his management ability. At the time this had not occurred to me. Instead, I began to think through how I could extricate myself from this uncomfortable situation. My response to the stuckness of the conversation took the form of silent role play, in which I went through a range of options in my mind that might offer me a 'get out'. I remembered some funding available for training, and I offered this to him without an expectation of a positive response. I had no sense that this might become a way of opening up more meaningful conversation for him, and the feeling of being let in for me.

In paying attention to an increased awareness of how private or silent conversation simultaneously arises in the midst of relating, a more nuanced understanding of advising practice emerges. Burkitt (2012) suggests that this form of self-dialogue comes from the imagination, as private conversation arises in the mind as we imagine what others may be thinking and saying about us. This silent conversation is not related to the adviser alone. This is a dynamic process, in which, as reflexive human beings, we are always responding locally and abstracting from experience at the same time, calling to mind thoughts of how others might see us and our actions (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). As Siegel (2008) suggests, 'mind' in this sense exists in and between individuals, rather than as some 'thing' that is enskulled. It is in these processes that a sense of self and other arises in the social relations between individuals (Burkitt, 1991). Orr and Bennett (2009:85) talk of something similar in respect of research practice:

> Reflexivity in social research recognises the inevitably dynamic relationship between researchers and their subjects, rejecting the idea of a binary relationship in which the researcher discovers facts about her/his subject without being influenced by the subject or without influencing the subject.

I argue that a similar dynamic is arising between adviser and client. I agree with the view of Palmer-Woodward (2007) when she challenges a view of consultants as being 'left unchanged (in identity terms) by the relationship'. In taking an alternative view of advising practice arising in the living present (Loewen Walker, 2014, Shaw, 2002), past experience and anticipation of the future of all participants will influence how advising conversation co-evolves and is taken up.

My social understanding of advising is informed by Mead's (1934) theory of gesture and response, where, in the 'conversation of gestures', we have the ability to 'call out' in ourselves the responses we evoke (or intend to evoke) in others (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). Mead's work is reflected in Siegel's (1999, 2016) approach, in that each explores the emergence of 'mind' as a social process. From this perspective, as 'mind' arises simultaneously as 'self' and 'other' interact, we cannot understand conversation from a purely subjective view (Stacey, 2005b). This shift to a more complex understanding of interaction, in terms of the simultaneous conversation with self and other, reflects what Mead talked of as 'the social act' (Simpson, 2009). I understand that when interacting with others 'I' am influenced by the socialised 'me', in the private conversation and role play that arises, but I am also responding to the spontaneity of what comes up for others. The social act is the basis of making meaning, and it is a social structure in which commonalities can be recognised, but where we also 'probe, explore and creatively reconstrue meanings' (Simpson, 2009:1334). This view situates practice as evolving as a form of learning our way forward (Shaw, 2002), and this is an alternative view to the transfer of knowledge model put forward by Bennett and others. In this way, learning requires an openness to finding new meaning from situations that may not fit into current knowledge (Béres, 2017). This sounds very similar to the process I am referring to when describing my advising and research practice, and I am claiming that business advising arises in these processes.

This shift to an understanding of the mutuality of adviser conversation resonates with how relationships of power enable and constrain the ways we relate with others (Mowles, 2015). In ongoing processes of taking and ceding power, power shifts in the turn-taking and turn-making processes of conversation. I have talked of how I have recognised the power dynamic in the relationship with Jonathan where I often felt lacking a voice. With Peter, the power relationship seemed to be strongly in his favour. I had arrived at his premises, was sitting in his office, and I lacked an understanding of why he had agreed to an adviser meeting. As I sat opposite him, his body language gave me a sense of closedness, as he folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. There was no initial sense of a client–adviser relationship developing. This was one of those moments in which an increased sense of a private voice arises, reflecting that we are not just interacting with others, but with the self as well. Seen from this perspective, power is not a fixed position or something that can be held by an individual like an 'amulet' (Elias, 1978:80). This sense of negotiating is particularly noticeable in first meetings, where there can be an increased need to find a way of going on together. Peter's response to my opening question felt very personal, and I experienced a struggle to find a way of moving beyond such a put-down.

In reflecting on the opening minutes of the meeting with Peter, I felt no assurance that I was recognised by him or by myself as 'an adviser'. I have talked of coming to advising with a lack of confidence, and in the early days of advising I could argue that it was in these moments of being challenged that my deeply held feelings and sense of failure could call out particular behaviours. The outcomes of the 'what's next' question will be influenced by those deeply held feelings that can surface in the midst of conversation for adviser and client. I was not going to challenge him, so inviting him to explore whether there were any opportunities for us to work together seemed a non-confrontational way of finding a way forward. In thinking about the idea of power as being taken or ceded, with Peter I ceded power, but I was not powerless. I was genuinely interested in the twists and turns of strategy at MSB Ltd, and so I encouraged Peter to talk of the firm's history and his plans for the business, in what I considered to be a success story. Peter has since shared with me how he valued the opportunity to talk about things in an exploratory way, rather than through a more formulaic way of working. Writing now, I know that this initial meeting with Peter has led to a situation where, on and off, conversation has continued between us for over a decade. Most recently, he came to talk to the MBA students at UH, suggesting something of what I am talking about when I am discussing the idea of 'sustaining' conversation. I have mentioned that, after the meeting with Peter, when updating the system back at the Business Link office, I noticed that Colin had been one of those advisers Peter had chosen not to work with. I have wondered since if I offered something novel to Peter *because* of my lack of corporate experience, which allowed me to take a different approach to other advisers he had met.

Exploring mutuality and the idea of 'being let in' arising in and between adviser and client resonates with ideas of a 'struggle for recognition' (Honneth, 1995). Honneth draws on the ideas of Mead and Hegel, with the suggestion that an individual can gain public acknowledgement, self-confidence and self-esteem through relationships with others (Sandberg and Kubiak, 2013). In advising relationships, I have spoken about how a greater sense of self-worth can be experienced. This is a negotiated process in which recognition arises in the relationship between self and other, and which links to a sense of identity evolving in the process. With Tom (Chapter 5), I felt recognised by him in the shift to the mutuality of exploratory conversation. In this situation, the experience of CasanCo took on a different meaning for me, as I could see that it had relevance to the situation that Tom was facing. It is in this process that I developed more of a positive and practical relation to the self through my perception of the way the meeting went with Tom. A greater sense of self-knowledge requires reflection; however, this is not reflection in the sense of introspection, but external reflection mediated by another person (Honneth and Margalit, 2001:128). In taking time to enable others

to discuss their business issues, a client can gain a different perspective, and I have often felt that in these moments that a client can gain an increased sense of self-worth. This resonates with how Julia from TNN (Chapter 6) asked specifically about what I thought of them as a family business.

In drawing on the narrative of the meeting with Jane (Chapter 4), I gained an understanding of how an individual can feel misrecognised when they lack a sense of connection to themselves and to their situation in the advising process. I was asked to meet with her following her complaint about a visit by one of my colleagues. Tim, one of the specialist advisers, came from a banking background and it seemed that Jane felt he had used his financial expertise to judge her ideas before she had had a chance to explain them fully. In coming away from our meeting, I felt a deep connection to her when she thanked me, saying '*I just wanted to be listened to*'. This was heartfelt, and it called out similar feelings in me, resonating with Honneth's suggestion that we can recognise a sense of our self in others. I recognised something of what this meant to Jane because it was important to me, too.

The short narrative above about the meeting with Jane is an example of how narratives evolve in the iterative process. In making a connection to themes of recognition, I can now understand that Jane's implicit plea for her ideas to be listened to reflects a hope that these would be regarded by others as worthy of discussion and further exploration. I am reminded of the breakdown of my relationship with Jonathan; I would argue that I did not feel that I had a voice in the client–adviser relationship, or that I was being listened to. However, I cannot overlook that some situations may require more specialist knowledge than the mostly generalist perspective that I took with clients. Seeking the support of both Thomas Johnston for marketing and Samuel Crawford for shareholder issues to help Elaine (Chapter 8) was an example of this in practice.

Tillmar (2007) points out a lack of understanding in research of the diversity of women business owners, which I would extend to women business advisers. I noted a particular example of this from the literature (Chapter 4) where it seems that a male voice is reflecting on the advising process:

> For many women, problems that they consider to be a volcano, we would consider to be a hill. They do not realize that these problems are something that they can get over eventually (Dyer and Ross 2007:140).

In reading this disparaging comment, frustrations are called out for me in thinking of the times I have worked with male colleagues, and how they often applied a similar perspective to what

I was doing. Although issues of gender are not specifically considered here, I am mindful that they offer an area for future exploration that is not fully developed in the mainstream view of advising. This highlights a gap in the literature for future development that can offer an improved understanding of advising from the perspective of the female voice. This is an approach which is largely overlooked in the strongly gender-biased discourse of males in business. Here, however, I focus on a more general view of the tensions between linear perspectives and those that offer a social and complex understanding of practice.

Paradoxical tensions arising in the research

Up to this point, I have argued that there is not a simple, consistent view of what I am doing when I say I am advising, although there is some consistency in themes arising that reflect advising as a responsive, emergent process. Each narrative reflects different aspects of what this approach means in practice, with overarching themes of advising as negotiated, dynamic, and involving emotions. Paying attention to experience as a means of learning is important as we deepen understanding (Higgins, 2017b). I argue that this awareness is critical to sustaining conversation and to asking questions that challenge and open up new ways of thinking and learning. I was struck by how Palmer-Woodward (2007) talks of staying open to stuck patterns of conversation because something new or novel may emerge as thinking moves from stuck to flowing. Themes of stuckness arise in many ways in the narratives that have been included in this research, and they have led me to think more about how it is, in recognising these patterns, that searching for a response can lead to further stuckness or to a shift toward an enlivened conversation. Stacey (2005b:480) talks of how when we get stuck in patterns of conversation it can feel deadening, oppressive and neurotic. There were echoes of this in conversation with Frank, where his avoidance of my questions reflects how emotions related to feelings of fear, denial or general discomfort can find their way into advising conversations. I identified similar challenges in talking about the metaphor of stepping stones and murky water that I used to explore my own stuckness with writing (Chapter 4). Initially, I had not made a connection to how clients such as Frank might feel about sharing personal feelings with someone else. This has led me to reflect that I cannot remain detached from this sense of stuckness. For me at CasanCo, in struggling with finding my own place at the company and dealing with my own anxieties about being useful and fitting in, I had never considered that my feelings might be influencing how I was relating to others, such as James Sparrow. I am mindful that, unlike in the meeting with Frank where there was a sense of being let in, the patterns of conversation with James never shifted to something more meaningful. Taking these ideas forward, I recognise that awareness of these discomforts, often experienced viscerally, has led to

understanding that advising practice arises through finding ways to stay open despite the discomfort of these stuck patterns.

I am aware that I worked over many months and years with the PhD group leading to feeling supported and less vulnerable to the judgements of others. This contrasts with being a Business Link adviser where most meetings with clients would last around two hours. While this could be challenging, it could also be seen as an enabling constraint, leading me to develop and experience many different ways of building trust and rapport in response to my desire for, and anticipation of, a move to a sense of being let in. My confidence has grown over time, enabling me to trust myself to work in challenging ways, and this resonates with ideas of being recognised by others, but also recognising the self as taking a lead in the situation. As I have suggested, the power to take a lead is negotiated in the midst of conversation, something that Mowles (2009) relates to temporary leadership when working with clients. Staying open to exploration takes time, and has likenesses to Shaw's (2011) suggestion that it requires paying attention to 'conversation as an art'. With Elaine (Chapter 8), I talk of the struggle to stay with the open conversational process, with me resisting her determination that I should provide her with the plan, preferring to convince her of the value of it being developed together. In the narrative of TNN, the family-run nursery (Chapter 6), I was caught up in tensions between the founder of the company and his family. There was little sense of being recognised, particularly as the dog continued to lick my trousers as Gerald talked at me! However, I have talked of how it was only when conversation became more responsive and enlivened, and Julia entered the discussion, that I felt I could take a lead in questioning and challenging her and Gerald about the business and their situation.

It was in the narrative of TNN that I talked of my sense of the process of 'holding space' for reflection and exploration having encouraged a more open discussion between Gerald and Julia. This is a negotiated process in which the reflective experience can be sustained (Jakube et al., 2016). Talking of holding space does need some further explanation, as the term might suggest a situation in which an individual can take responsibility. In reflecting on what it means in practice, I would argue that, with the family, this idea of holding space was co-created, sustained by taking a lead in responding to the ideas and comments of different individuals as they entered the conversation. These practices develop over time, and require having the courage and skill to invite and sustain what Shaw (2011) understands as open-ended and free-flowing conversation. Working responsively, I recognise that advising practice can have similarities to therapeutic conversation or the related practices of coaching or mentoring (Chapter 8), but that this is not always so. There is no predetermined blueprint for advising,

however there are patterns that I have identified that offer some generalisations that can be drawn from these ideas.

What is consistent and generalisable from the research?

In Chapter 4, I introduced a metaphor of stepping stones and murky water as a way of thinking about stuckness as a dynamic process. As I draw these ideas together and conclude the research process, this idea of stepping stones is one that offers further exploration of the themes that have arisen. I have suggested that I was disappointed by what I considered the unfulfilled promise of systems thinking. This form of thinking situates action in autonomous individuals, who become objective observers of organisations understood as entities; there is some sense of these becoming like stepping stones separated from the murky complexity of everyday life. This is prevalent in management literature.

In writing about Mike, the client with the falcon tethered outside in the car park (Chapter 6), the narrative has a theme that I have come to recognise as a further example of working unreflectively with the linearity of systems and processes. I had been disconcerted by this smooth-running, well-ordered world. His situation did not ring true with me in relation to my experience of business, and this reflects something of how we can lose the 'jagged character' of practice in the rationalising process (Schatzki et al., 2005). Hearing him describing in detail his systems and processes and watching him pointing out data on his computer screens felt stifling. Mike's suggestion that he wanted me to 'find something wrong' felt manipulative, as if he was pushing me into a particular adviser role, setting me up as an observer of his organisational activity, with which I was uncomfortable. The questioning where I was attempting to shift conversation away from his monological style of speaking 'at' me was a form of provocation. I asked him about 'him', inviting him to reflect on his 'self'. I sensed a change in his demeanour as he became more open and energised, revealing something of himself that had been absent from our initial conversation. I was disconcerted by what he chose to share with me. Having been shown the CCTV cameras of his staff under surveillance and the falcon tethered outside, Mike's images stayed with me as a darker sense of how he was responding to uncertainty. I am reminded that gaining a closer emotional connection will not always result in what could be considered to be an advising relationship.

In coming back to the research question of 'what I am doing when I say I am advising', the narrative of Trevor (Chapter 8) strikes me as paradoxical. I have talked specifically of how a comment from a colleague led to my increased awareness of advising as 'not telling others what to do'. With Trevor, his light bulb moment was unsettling in my realisation that he might be taking something from our discussion out of context, as specific advice rather than something

for further exploration. This response to Trevor challenges the idea of advice as something given. Advising offers learning opportunities to clients, however this must reflect the 'dynamic and continuous life experiences and the struggles' which entrepreneurs face in their daily activities (Higgins et al., 2013b:153). This is not straightforward, and the ease with which Trevor took up this idea as a solution to his problems is in tension with how I relate practice to Honneth's ideas of struggle.

In arguing for advising as sustaining conversation, it is not about 'just talking'. In exploring what this means, throughout this thesis I have identified particular terms that serve the purpose of describing what might be going on in this 'sustaining' process. However, I am now more wary of using particular terms unreflectively. In the past, I used language that I am now aware could be seen as displaying a Kantian perspective of implied dualism, reflecting an external/internal dimension that I have critiqued and argued against throughout this work. For example, when I use the term 'being let in' I am describing something that is not fixed but arises from the tensions between resistance and recognition. Perhaps because at the time I began using this term I was more comfortable with systems thinking, this led to what I now see as systems-type language of 'being let in'. I propose that that 'being let in' is not the opposite of a spatial understanding of practice that might also suggest an opposite sense of 'being left out'. I am arguing that, in contrast to the idea of a dualism with a spatial dimension, the idea of 'being let in' reflects more closely Siegel's (2016) idea of 'feeling felt'. Therefore, in talking about this idea as being of importance to my practice, a further question is posed: *'being let in to what?*' I argue that this feeling of 'being let in' can arise 'as if' I am being let in to the private or silent thoughts of others. It is important to recognise, however, that in using language unreflectively there is a risk that the 'as if' nature of terminologies can be lost.

A limitation of social approaches is that specific themes and expressions that arise are not directly transferrable to other situations. In talking about their reflexive research approach as 'unsettling', Orr and Bennett (2009:88) suggest a paradox that in setting out to systematically demonstrate how 'unsettling' the process of reflexive research was 'we are involved in a settling of our radically reflexive credentials'. I recognise something similar that in putting complex ideas into words on a page, which will inevitably follow a linear format, it can increase the risk that particular ideas can be taken up by others as formulaic; I have the same feeling about the giving of advice. I am aware of a contradiction however, and I am challenging my own critique of systems here, that there are times when systems language offers a sense of stability that helps to bring increased meaning to experience that can otherwise seem quite fluid. This reflects something of my bounded stepping stones idea, and how drawing on the metaphor

helped me to make sense of, and communicate, my ideas. Similarly, I know using the term 'being let in' resonated with others, and in this way it stuck. I am arguing therefore that taking a reflexive approach does not mean that conclusions lack wider applicability in the form of analogies that can be applied in other areas of enquiry but there are challenges in pre-empting what this means where these ideas are taken up in local practice.

Recognising practice as arising in complex responsive processes of ordinary everyday conversation offers a deeper understanding of the paradoxical tension of stable-instability of social interaction and the emergence of organisation. Themes, terms and ideas that arise from experience can guide and influence how we work with others and offer explanations that have some generalisability. Noble (1999) talks of how in jazz, rather than being random, there are musical structures that serve a purpose in the self-organising improvisation process; in a similar way I found that in advising there were devices that could be used to lead to new ways of understanding. This paradox is one of a tension between the general and the particular. It is in the particularisation of abstracted ideas of theory and experience that the inconsistency of local practice can be understood. In this way, although I am arguing for an understanding of practice that is under perpetual construction, I am suggesting that, in drawing on this understanding this involves practical judgement, or what Aristotle called *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2005). This offers an alternative discourse to research that strives for the scientific knowledge of *episteme*. This suggests a process of abduction arising from the practical wisdom or phronetic knowledge, which enables the exploration of complexity with conclusions that are 'unpretentious in their assumptions of fallibility and provisionality' (Thomas, 2010:577). Based on this perspective it give a sense of understanding for now, but we can never know how ideas will be taken up or play out in particular situations, or how they may further develop or change in different contexts in a continuously evolving future.

In further responding to the idea of sustaining conversation, the research has increased my awareness of how supporting artefacts, and ideas in the form of social objects, can serve a purpose in keeping conversation going, by shifting the focus of conversation onto something more tangible. The folder that I would take into meetings could be seen as a way of managing my anxiety around the uncertainty of meetings. It was there as a fallback position, although once conversation took off it was less likely to be needed or used. I have talked about how offering business cards (Chapter 2) and drinking tea (Chapters 2, 5, and 6) can form a nonthreatening opening to a meeting, (unless you throw the business card into the air!). Writing up action plans into a document at the end of a meeting served as a way of bringing threads of wide-ranging conversation together. This activity also gave me an opportunity to set up a

follow-up meeting to see how the client was getting on at a later date; an example of sustaining conversation across multiple meetings. I recognise the taken-for-granted nature of these activities, which can be understood as gestures, in the way that Mead (1938) talks about 'social objects'. Social objects not only constitute a stimulus for action, but also influence how we will act in relation to our perception of them. These reflections are not just related to face-to-face conversational processes, but are caught up with how local interaction influences the social patterns and trends that simultaneously influence the local context. These processes arise from our socialisation, although they will be particularised in how they are taken up in local practice.

I have suggested that a further example of a social object is business planning. In suggesting we cannot point to where an organisation 'is', Stacey (2003b) argues that all we can do is to point to the artefacts that we use with others in working together. The activity of producing planning documents plays a part in structuring generalised thinking related to possibilities for future organisational development. In the context of entrepreneurial learning it has been argued that there is a risk that rational approaches 'do not necessarily equip the entrepreneur with the ability to gain a real insight into the natural practices of what it means to be a practicing entrepreneur' (Higgins et al., 2013b:137). I suggested that with Elaine (Chapter 8) and the development of the business plan, what we were undertaking was as much of a learning process as it was a process of producing something fixed in the form of a plan to go to the panel. I actively took a lead in this because I realised that writing the plan separated from her contribution could leave her vulnerable in the funding panel discussions. It was in the social processes of making sense of the global patterns of institutional funding rules that a sense of organisation emerged as we were drawing on Elaine's ideas for the future of the business activity and my advising and business experience. In this process, it was 'as if' the organisation was becoming more tangible to us and to the funding panel later when we presented the plan.

Interaction as complex responsive processes offers an alternative way of thinking about such global patterning as 'emerging within human interdependence' (Stacey, 2005a:13). In the gathering of GVA (Chapter 7), I gained an insight into how it is impossible to anticipate the emergence of the global patterns arising from the playing out of many local decisions, as the individuals involved are continually cooperating and competing. GVA took on new meanings as individuals negotiated what the imposition of GVA monitoring meant for them. This relational understanding reflects how Barad (2007), drawing on quantum physics, talks of being in the world as entanglement, challenging notions of causality that are assumed in traditional scientific theory. In taking a relational view it can be seen that emerging patterns are not stable, quantitative parameters that can be set by external agency (Shaw, 2002). No matter how much

policymakers desire to seek control through measurement and evaluation, there are no direct links between local conversation of those working in government-policy contexts and the actions taken up in local advising practice with clients and colleagues. This process leads to intended and unintended consequences. One unintended consequence in relation to GVA and IBD was that although these government initiatives were introduced to increase the monitoring and control of adviser activity they ultimately led to an enthusiasm for hitting numerical targets that over time reduced the perceived quality of the services provided to clients. The reports of decreased satisfaction became a factor in the closing down of the Business Link service. Similarly, in following up with Elaine about the business plan project, I found that very little that was planned had come to fruition; however, our planning processes had served the purpose of achieving the funding to get the idea off the ground. I recognise analogous patterns emerging now I am working in Higher Education, in which the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework and the league tables for universities drive particular behaviours that cannot be predicted in advance.

When Elias (2001) talked of the perspective of 'the airman and the swimmer', he suggested that this could help to make sense of the situations we are concerned with. This has been my intention in this exploration of business advising. Paying attention to the process of advising, in reflecting on the work I was doing with others, I recognise how we are caught up in the gaming activities related to the 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990; Elias, 2001) in which we are immersing ourselves. In taking the perspective of the airman, there is an opportunity to explore the broader patterns that arise from many local interactions, and this provides a sense of stability. Elias further suggested that it is only by taking the perspective of the swimmer that we can get the sense that there is nothing fixed about the way individuals are responding to self-organising patterns (Mowles, 2015). Reflecting on practice can give a sense of detaching from experience, but, as Barad and Elias suggest, we are always caught up in the perspectives of both airman and swimmer and we can never step away from our involvement in these processes.

Conclusions and contributions of the research

In exploring advising as relational, I am drawing attention to the social context of advising, in which the history and anticipations of participants will be forming, and informed by, the advising process taking place in the present. This interpretation challenges the view of advising as focused on formulaic outcomes that do not reflect the social complexity of local situations. I am claiming advising is a temporal process in which business advice arises in conversational processes that are negotiated, dynamic and involve emotions. Based on this view, I highlight a

number of contributions of this research that offer an alternative perspective to the mainstream discourse on business advising.

Firstly, a major contribution is the development of a practice-based understanding of advising. This approach is under-represented in the literature, particularly in the context of government-funded support. In this process, advising conversation co-evolves and advice will reflect influences that are simultaneously local and global.

Secondly, as a study of advising practice, this research advances an understanding of the role of the business adviser. Drawing on the work of Mead (1934), Elias (1978, 1980), Burkitt (2012) and Honneth (1995), and informed by the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2001a), I argue that advising arises in tensions of resistance and recognition. In developing this view, I propose that the identity of adviser and client arise in the mutuality and responsiveness of the turn-taking and turn-making of conversation. I came to recognise this as a sense of 'being let in' to the more private or silent thoughts of others, and I argue that this recognition is critical to sustaining conversation that challenges perceptions, opening up new ways of thinking and acting.

A third contribution to advising practice is the recognition of the influence of supplementary artefacts in exploratory advising processes. I argue that the offering of business cards or tea drinking, or the formalities of agreeing action plans, business planning, the offering of particular government initiatives, or government monitoring such as GVA, can all play a part in the emergence and sustaining of advising conversation.

Fourthly, there is a contribution to the literature on research methodology. In taking this research approach my awareness of advising practice as a form of enquiry (Dewey, 1938) has evolved. In taking up a reflexive narrative method, I am extending work that explores practice by drawing on personal experience (Shaw, 2002, Palmer-Woodward, 2007, Mowles, 2009, Hicks, 2010, Wenzel, 2012). Specifically, this work contributes to reflective and reflexive approaches in researching the context of entrepreneurial small-business owners and managers that is under-represented in the literature.

There is an additional contribution identified, and that is to policy. In this exploration of advising practice, which largely focuses on the provision of government-funded support, in recognising the complexity of small-business contexts there are opportunities to inform the development of future business-support programmes to increase their relevance and take up by small business owners and entrepreneurs.

Finally, I am aware that a significant contribution has been to my own practice. I now understand that the work I am doing when I say that I am advising is practice, and these ideas are continually influencing, and being influenced by, other areas of my life. I have drawn on the concept of 'recognition', and this connects with much of the work that I am doing when I work with clients, and more recently with students. I have one further example to narrate of how this view of advising has influenced my ongoing practice.

In January 2017, I was standing in front of twelve full-time managers who had signed up to a newly introduced business programme I was leading. Recognising, as a mature student myself, how study has been important in my life, I wanted to give these individuals the chance to take up similar opportunities. As I reflected on the group, I recognised that I had fought hard to secure places for 'non-standard' applicants who had significant work experience but may not have had a first degree. One of these was my daughter. Having got to this point, I felt an increased sense of responsibility.

Sitting away from the main group, scanning the room and getting a sense of the group as they were introduced to academic writing, my attention fell on different individuals. I became aware of my private conversation. I was posing questions in my mind about whether this weekend would go well, what the students were thinking, was I giving them too much information, or maybe not enough, with anxiety coming up about whether I was getting it 'right'. Paying attention to this anxiety, I realised that my private conversation was drawing attention to uncertainties that I had no way of addressing. I posed a new question to myself: *how could I know if I was 'getting it right'*? The idea that what was happening now could somehow determine the success of the whole weekend became ridiculous to me. These fears seemed less worrying, and as the morning sessions ended, I took the time to talk to the students over lunch. I felt my anxiety reduce. I had overlooked the fact that the group, coming together for the first time, were dealing with their own anxieties. For all of them this was their first experience of master's level study, and for many their first experience of taking any form of degree-level course.

On the second day, a student shared with the group feelings of being 'overwhelmed' by the thought of academic writing. I recognised that, in having the courage to speak into the group, this openness resonated with others. Richardson (1997:186) talks of her experience of creating supportive environments:

> where students can feel "safe" to err, transgress, 'because there is space for tensions and differences to be acknowledged, celebrated, rather than buried or eaten alive'.

Rather than dismissing these anxieties or moving away from the feelings that were being shared, as I might have done in the past, I supported the group to talk openly together about what this meant in relation to study, and what we were doing together. Others talked of having similar concerns, realising that they were not alone shifted the conversation and the energy in the group.

This resonates with how I now understand my practice. Siegel quotes one of his patients who, when asked about his anxiety about getting things right, of seeking control, suggested that reflection meant that:

> I just don't take all those feelings and thoughts so seriously – and they don't take me on such a wild ride anymore! (Siegel, 2010:101).

I am continually questioning how I can stay open to the ideas of others and how I can encourage others to remain open to sharing their thoughts and ideas. This way of working is not straightforward and there is not always the time or the inclination to work in these ways. However, in the moments of 'being let in', where an increased sense of mutual recognition arises, there is an emotional and visceral connection that has the potential to offer more meaningful conversation from which all participants might learn and change. The influence on my practice is that I, too, no longer feel the same levels of anxiety when dealing with uncertainty, and this reduces the sense of stuckness and opens up new opportunities to work with others.

Last words

In the midst of my final PhD year, I was invited to contribute my experience to a book on change (Bentley, 2018). This offered me an experience of detached involvement, in which I was reading about what 'I' had said in our interview regarding my learning about advising, organisations and change. There is a section titled 'what did I learn?' and these are my words:

> I suppose, throughout this process, and at the end of it, there was a sense of 'How do you have more open conversations? How do you have conversations where you can explore things rather than blaming?' (Bentley, 2018:59).

This continues to be a question I struggle with in my work with others. Practice is spontaneous and emergent, requiring responsiveness for all participants to what is coming up in the present.

Over the course of this research, in making sense of practice, I have been excited, frustrated, challenged and confused. However, overall, it has been an extremely rewarding and insightful process, and one that continues to influence my life and work. I have been privileged to have

the support of a group of supervisors and peers who have questioned and queried the thoughts and ideas that have arisen in reflecting on experience of small firms and business advising. I have also been able to respond to the thoughts and ideas that I scribbled down many years ago. With the increased awareness that reflexivity has brought as I have developed my practice, I now understand how reflective and reflexive processes continue to transform my thinking.

As I am aware that I am not providing specific recommendations for advising practice, there is one further consideration to be addressed. There are no recommendations or prescriptions for success outlined in this document, because of the fragmented and partial nature of the knowledge that forms the basis of its conclusions. In writing about experience, I am drawing on the work of many others who take a social approach, and I am adding my voice to the call for further enquiry into practice. I like to think that, as others engage with the themes and ideas developed here, this experience and conclusions drawn will resonate with their work with others.

Appendix 1 – Narrative of CasanCo – themes of learning and (un)sustainability

Experiencing business – immersion in the day-to-day activity of a small firm

I didn't just wake up one day and find that I was a business adviser. In my twenties and thirties it never occurred to me that I would be in such a role. When I married, my husband Roy was running a business and from the snippets of information that I heard about I remember being quite daunted by all the things that he seemed to be managing on a daily basis. I have chosen the word 'snippets' because based on his past experience he had made a choice not to bring work worries home, to avoid discussions of work spilling into his home life. This meant that although I had visited the premises of his company quite often it was in an informal way. I had polite discussions with people who would come and say hello and then disappear off to do their work. In this way I had been largely shielded from the day-to-day activities that took place at CasanCo, Roy's export packing and freight forwarding company. As a packing company, our main expertise was in manufacturing wooden cases and crates for high-value products that would be shipped all over the world. The company rented 25,000 square feet of factory space and at its peak had around twenty employees. It was a niche industry and one that had been extremely lucrative when the company had started in 1967. In 1994, when I began to become more involved the industry was changing significantly although at the time I was not aware of this.

I did not feel as if I had experience of business at this time but I had been involved in small businesses all my life. My mother ran a dancing school for nearly 50 years. I had been immersed in this all my life and didn't really see it as a business. Much of my childhood was spent dancing, or watching dancing, or in later years, being sent off to teach somebody something to do with dance. I didn't see my mother's business in the same way that I understood CasanCo which would probably have described at the as more 'legitimate'. It did not occur to me that this was a business, to me it was a way of life.

In 1984 started my own dance school locally to where I was living. Over a period of 10 years I built up the classes and at its peak I had around fifty students attending classes. I never once compared what I was doing to what Roy was doing in his business. I am now aware that there is a surprising statistic that of 4.8 million companies in the UK around 4.4 million fall into the category of businesses with less than ten employees. The government regularly reports on the number of companies trading and categorise those with less than ten employees as 'micro-businesses'. This makes up the majority of companies in the UK. So despite not seeing these as businesses, I was involved like many other people in generating income from their own business activity.

In 1994 when our daughter was about to start school Roy made a suggestion that I could work in his business to earn some 'pocket money' in the increased spare time that I would have. As teaching dance was not particularly well-paid I thought that the idea of making some additional money seemed like a good idea. I didn't know very much about the business but I was keen to learn. I didn't feel any particular pressure. I had not had a job working for a formal business organisation so it was more like I was going to work for the first time, rather than my previous experience of just 'doing' dancing. Looking back I realise that being brought in to earn some pocket money might sound a bit condescending but at the time I really felt that I knew nothing about 'business'. In this way it was quite reassuring to me that I would be able to learn more about running a business and there would others I could learn from who would be actually be 'doing it' that I could learn from. Our daughter started school in September and I turned up to work at CasanCo. I was positioned in the main office; I had a desk, a typewriter, and sat with two colleagues in this hub of administration for the company. I was keen to learn

Incorporating management theory into everyday organisational activity

Earlier in the year, before I started work in the September, I had started an Open University degree course. My motivation to study came from what I felt was a lack of formal education. From the age of eleven I attended a Stage School where there was a lack of focus on qualifications and I left with minimal O Levels. Wanting to learn and formalise this learning was something that I became more aware of as I got older and this was why I had decided to enrol on a degree course. My choice of course was influenced by a conversation with Roy. When we had discussed that I might possibly work at the company he had commented that he had become aware that computers seemed to be more common in businesses and that perhaps I could take on the job of introducing them into the company. It felt useful to have a task and there was an option of a technology foundation course. The line that grabbed my

attention was that at the end of the first year I would understand how to use a 'standard business computer'. With this I could see that I would be able to combine my new educational skills with introducing computers to the company. We use were taught a DOS-based system called Frameworks, and quite quickly I could see that the mundane repetition of the daily administration could be transformed.

Unfortunately due to a family tragedy at the end of that year everything was to change. In December 1994 Roy and I made a choice to take on the upbringing of my sister's two sons. Our daughter was four at the time, and the boys, six and two respectively, came to live with us. The shift in our family circumstances was dramatic and required a lot of adjustment. What I also found was that I became aware that it was really important to have sense of financial security that had not really occurred to me before. Roy was older than me and due to retire with a few years and I began to ask myself, what happens then? The other directors were not much younger than Roy and there was not much of a succession plan in place that I could see.

My confidence as I was becoming more aware of the business activity was offset to some extent by the feeling of anxiety and that at times I was in a sort of 'no man's land'. In learning about the business I was coming up against things that I didn't understand, and by asking the questions I was coming up against tensions that I couldn't explain. This may well have been influenced by the shift in our family situation and the response that Roy often gave that 'the business could run itself!' I found that I was part of the succession plan, even if no one was interested in developing a formal one. Although succession planning was not an immediate issue as it seemed that there were a few years before the main retirements would take place, it was something that would not go away. What became a concern was that it seemed to me that no one seemed interested in talking about plans for the future.

Stepping up to introduce organisational change

Over time I was finding my feet. I realise now that as I sat at my desk in this busy office I was in a privileged position. I could watch what was going on, I was learning the ropes, trying to fit in with the way things were done. Most of the administrative activity was directed at Natalie and Samantha, and as I was only working part-time I got to do small projects which I mostly enjoyed. As I sat at my desk, I could see that so much energy went into the minutiae of everyday activity of counting, adding up, typing, that there must be ways to save time and become more efficient. On many occasions I was given one of the accounts books to add up for the month. There were day books for sales, for purchases, petty cash. It was all double entry and everything had to add up at the end of the month. This could take nearly a week to complete. It did not take me long to notice that on a spreadsheet the totals could be added up in seconds – in fact you could have running totals so that you could keep track as you went along rather than just at the end of the month. As I had been set the task to find out how CasanCo might use this technology, and with my increasing familiarity with computers I believed that this could revolutionise the way that things were being done. This was a starting point for me. I would begin to implement some simple tasks that could be undertaken on the computer rather than manually. It seemed like a sensible idea that had a good connection to business improvement and efficiency.

While I had sat somewhat benignly behind my desk doing small tasks nobody really took much notice of me but the day that the first computer came through the office door I sensed that I was now being viewed my some with suspicion. The introduction of computers had begun to send out ripples and by starting to ask questions I became aware that this was causing additional tensions. My questions began upsetting the flow of things and I quickly found out that my task of bringing in computers was not going to be as straightforward as I had first assumed. As computerisation had not started out as my idea I suppose I walked into this without realising the potential disturbance this would cause. I imagined that people would be pleased to find easier and quicker ways to do things but I had not bargained for the attachment that people had for their paper based systems, and their tried and tested personal routines[12].

With my focus on organisational improvement as I gained in confidence I started to make some changes in the admin office. These were small things at first and my motivation for these was to make life easier,

[12] There is a whole literature on systems and routines in small businesses that is not being addressed here but will be picked up later in exploring organisations

particularly for me. I was the only one initially with a computer anyway but I found that I could set up templates for all sorts of purposes. As a freight company we would often be setting up complicated Letters of Credit and Certificates of Origin which were official documents that would allow our clients to get claim payments that could run into hundreds of thousands of pounds for goods they were exporting. If these documents were incorrect then this could be disastrous, as a company we were responsible for this process and it had to be mistake free. Computers did make this more reliable.

It was a male dominated culture at the company. There was also a hierarchy that determined what people could do and not do. I read a quote once that 'the shop floor starts where the carpet finishes' and that was my experience here. Outside the office was a carpeted corridor, and a door out to the factory where 'the men' worked. This was the term used mostly although sometimes they were discussed as 'the boys'.

Broader influences on local change

Being Roy's wife had its advantages when it came to access. Following a finance module I applied the theory to our accounts, and this led to discussions about monthly management reporting. I was frustrated that a lot of work would go into the producing of the report, there would be a short discussion about what was on the bottom line but then they would carry on the day-to-day work, rather than think about how things might change. There were underlying tensions that would flare up. I am sure now that some of these tensions were increased because those who had worked at the company for years could see that there was a shift in the industry and this was creating anxiety about the future.

These industry challenges were forcing a rapidly diminishing customer base. The manufacturers of the products that we were packing and shipping (our clients) were now facing cheaper imports to which they were finding it difficult to respond. When they did get sales they wanted cheaper packing and freighting costs and we were often in competition with our competitors in a race to the bottom on price. Rather than work out how we could afford to cut our rates there were knee-jerk reactions and lower prices were offered just to keep the cash flow going and this was demoralising for everyone. Some really good clients that we had worked with for years either went out of business or were changing suppliers purely on cost. In one situation James Sparrow was working on a quotation and he added on an extra 10% uplift. He said it was the only way that we could make a profit on the job. There was no analysis, no thought about how we could reduce our costs. He also said that we would not lose the client because they needed us … we heard a week or two later that they no longer needed us at all. It was a terrible time and yet no one seemed to face up to what was happening. I had come into the company at the time when after 20 years of good profits the business climate was changing and I did not know what to do.

When I got a call from Business Link, with the offer of business support this seemed like an opportunity. I attended a number of workshops, and encouraged others to get involved with new ways of thinking. In 2000, having taken on more and more responsibility I took up the role of managing director when Roy and two other directors retired. When I took the role on the company had made a substantial loss, and in two years we worked together bring our finances to the point where we were showing a small profit. It felt to me like we were 'out of the woods' as the saying goes. I had been working with Jonathan for two years and initially found his support really valuable, someone to talk to and to bounce ideas around. He worked with what he called his Value Added Spreadsheet, a formulaic model that helped with the decision making. We clashed at times as he used this to bring everything together as a numerical figure, and I needed to keep hold of the way that this overlooked the individual situation. He had created this for working in a large corporate, and I began to lose faith in the value of this process.

Getting caught up in the uncertainty of interdependence of many individuals

In 2002, completely unexpectedly one our shipments to China that we were organising on behalf of a client got caught up in a situation which put us under strain. The shipment had been managed by our freight agent, and they had bent some rules with regard to the shipment which meant that we could not get it released for the client. Our agent refused to take responsibility and we were faced with an expensive law suit to recover the £750,000 for the loss of the goods in transit. Our client held us responsible and intended to sue us for the problem. The projected outcome was that we would not survive this. As MD I had a number of choices to take.

Living through this time I found that my own sense of self challenged, should I fight on and potentially lose everything? It seemed to me that we had worked so hard to get back to profitability this situation was like the final straw. Should I close the business and reopen in what is commonly called a 'phoenix' where you leave losses behind and start again? This was an option, however in the end, I made the decision to close the company. In conversation with a friend who had a long business experience, I told him that I would have to raise a mortgage on our house. He asked 'can you guarantee that you will not be in the same situation in a few years' time - are you willing to put everything at risk?' This question was particularly challenging at the time. I decided regretfully to close down the company, albeit as honourably as I could in the circumstances. The result of the decision left me feeling desperately low, and the sense of failure and feeling that I had let people down stayed with me.

Jonathan, the Business Link adviser was unable to offer any support in this situation. I wrote in my journal how he came in saw what was going on and then walked away. It was six months after this time that I secured a role as a business adviser. I went into the role feeling less able than many of my more experienced colleagues who had come from corporate backgrounds. I consider now, as I have been able to write more openly about this situation that perhaps this experience of failure gave me an insight into the challenges of clients that perhaps other advisers did not have. Also the way that Jonathan was unable to respond to what was coming up with the issues we were facing left me feeling that while his approach offered a sense of certainty, what it lacked was an understanding of uncertainty. This stayed with me in my advising work

Appendix 2 – Timeline of research

Year	Work	Narratives	Study
1984	Teaching Dance School	Dancing and teaching themes	RAD Teaching Diploma
1994	Working CasanCo	CasanCo	OU Degree
2002	Closure of CasanCo	Computer programme MD role	Technology Foundation Systems Thinking
2003	Business Link Herts - Adviser	Client meetings	Completed OU Degree
2004		MSB Ltd	Start MRes MMU
2006	Business Link East – T&D Manager	Industrial Wheels Orisa and others	Complexity Workshop Completion of MRes
2008	Secondment i10 liaison with Universities /Visiting Lecturer UH		
2009	Part-time UH/Business Link Adviser	Frank TTN	PhD UH
2010	Full-Time Senior Lecturer UH	MBA teaching	
2012	Programme Leader MBOS (Bespoke)	Work with Trevor Elaine MBOS Teaching	
2017	Programme Leader UH MSc BOS Open Programme Lead support for PG Degree Apprenticeship	MBOS Teaching	

References

ADAMS, J., ROBINSON, P. & VIGOR, A. 2003. *A new regional policy for the UK,* Institute for Public Policy Research.

ALLEN, P. 2006. *RE: Clarification of differences between systems approaches and complex systems approaches.* Type to ANDREWS, R. M.

ALVESSON, M. & JOHANSSON, A. W. 2002. Professionalism and politics in management consultancy work. *In:* CLARK, T. & FINCHAM, R. (eds.) *Critical Consulting - new perspecitves on the management consulting industry* Wiley-Blackwell.

ALVESSON, M., KÄRREMAN, D., STURDY, A. & HANDLEY, K. 2009. Unpacking the client(s): Constructions, positions and client–consultant dynamics. *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 25**,** 253-263.

ALVESSON, M. & SKÖLDBERG, K. 2009. *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research,* London, SAGE.

ALVESSON, M. & SVENINGSSON, S. 2016. *Changing organizational culture: Cultural change work in progress,* Routledge.

ANDREWS, R. Small firms as complex adaptive systems: The case of MSB Ltd. British Academy of Management conference, 2006 Harrogate

ANDREWS, R. 2012. Business Planning as Complex Responsive Processes: A case study approach *32nd Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship Conference.* Dublin

ANTONACOPOULOU, E. & CHIVA, R. 2007. The Social Complexity of Organizational Learning: The Dynamics of Learning and Organizing. *Management Learning,* 38**,** 277-295.

ANZUL, M. & ELY, M. 1988. Halls of mirrors: the introduction of the reflective mode. *Language Arts,* 65**,** 675-687.

ARAM, E. & NOBLE, D. 1998. Working with small-business managers in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity. *Working Paper Series No 18, University of Hertfordshire Business School, Hatfield.*

ARDLEY, B., MOSS, P. & TAYLOR, N. 2016. Strategies Snarks and stories: SME owner manager perceptions of business advisers. *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship,* 18**,** 211-231.

ARSHED, N., MASON, C. & CARTER, S. 2016. Exploring the disconnect in policy implementation: A case of enterprise policy in England. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* 34**,** 1582-1611.

ARTHUR, W. B. 1999. Complexity and the economy. *science,* 284**,** 107-109.

ATHERTON, A., KIM, J. Y. & KIM, H. 2010. Who's driving take-up? An examination of patterns of small business engagement with Business Link. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* 28**,** 257-275.

ATTARD, K. 2012. The role of narrative writing in improving professional practice. *Educational Action Research,* 20**,** 161-175.

ATTIA, M. & EDGE, J. 2017. Be (com) ing a reflexive researcher: a developmental approach to research methodology. *Open Review of Educational Research,* 4**,** 33-45.

AUDRETSCH, D. B. 2004. Sustaining Innovation and Growth: Public Policy Support for Entrepreurship. *Industry and Innovation,* 11**,** 167-193.

BÄCKLUND, J. & WERR, A. 2008. Constructing the legitimate buyer of management consulting services. *Journal of Organizational Change Management,* 21**,** 758-772.

BARAD, K. 2007. *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning,* duke university Press.

BATES, J. A. 1972. THE BOLTON REPORT (Book Review). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

BAUMARD, P. 1999. *Tacit knowledge in organizations*, Sage.

BENAVIDES-VELASCO, C. A., QUINTANA-GARCÍA, C. & GUZMÁN-PARRA, V. F. 2013. Trends in family business research. *Small business economics,* 40**,** 41-57.

BENNETT, R. 2007. Expectations-based evaluation of SME advice and consultancy: an example of business link services. *Journal of small business and enterprise development,* 14**,** 435-457.

BENNETT, R. & ROBSON, P. 1999a. Business link: Use, satisfaction and comparison with business shop and business connect. *Policy Studies,* 20**,** 107 - 131.

BENNETT, R. & ROBSON, P. 2005. The Advisor-SME Client Relationship: Impact, Satisfaction and Commitment. *Small Business Economics,* 25**,** 255.

BENNETT, R. J. & ROBSON, P. J. 1999b. The use of external business advice by SMEs in Britain. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development,* 11**,** 155-180.

BENNETT, R. J., ROBSON, P. J. A. & BRATTON, W. J. A. 2001. Government advice networks for SMEs: an assessment of the influence of local context on Business Link use, impact and satisfaction. *Applied Economics,* 33**,** 871-885.

BENTLEY, D. 2018. *Choosing to Change: An alternative Understanding of Change Management* Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge

BÉRES, L. 2017. Maintaining the ability to be unsettled and learn afresh: what philosophy contributes to our understanding of 'reflection'and 'experience'. *Reflective Practice,* 18**,** 280-290.

BERR 2008. The Economic Drivers of Government-funded Business Support - Supporting Analysis for 'Solutions for Business:Supporting Success'. *In:* BERR (ed.).

BETTANY, S. & WOODRUFFE-BURTON, H. 2009. Working the limits of method: the possibilities of critical reflexive practice in marketing and consumer research. *Journal of Marketing Management,* 25**,** 661-679.

BIECH, E. 2011. *The Business of Consulting: The Basics and Beyond,* Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

BOCHNER, A. P. 2001. Narrative's virtues. *Qualitative inquiry,* 7**,** 131-157.

BOLTON 1971. Report of the committee of inquiry on small firms. *Bolton Committee Report, Cmnd,* 4811.

BOLTON, G. 2006. Narrative writing: reflective enquiry into professional practice. *Educational Action Research,* 14**,** 203-218.

BOLTON, G. 2010. *Reflective practice: Writing and professional development,* Sage publications.

BOURDIEU, P. 1990. *The logic of practice,* Stanford University Press.

BOURDIEU, P. 2007. *Sketch for a self-analysis,* United Kingdom, Polity.

BOYCE, M. E. 1996. Organizational story and storytelling: a critical review. *Journal of organizational change management,* 9**,** 5-26.

BRANNICK, T. & COGHLAN, D. 2006. Reflexivity in management and business research: what do we mean? *Irish Journal of Management,* 27**,** 143.

BRINCKMANN, J., GRICHNIK, D. & KAPSA, D. 2010. Should entrepreneurs plan or just storm the castle? A meta-analysis on contextual factors impacting the business planning–performance relationship in small firms. *Journal of Business Venturing,* 25**,** 24-40.

BRUNER, J. 2004. Life as narrative. *Social research***,** 691-710.

BUCHOLTZ, M. & HALL, K. 2005. Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse studies,* 7**,** 585-614.

BURKE, R. J., MCKEEN, C. A. & MCKENNA, C. 1994. Benefits of Mentoring in Organizations: The Mentor′ s Perspective. *Journal of Managerial Psychology,* 9**,** 23-32.

BURKITT, I. 1991. *Social Selves: Theories of the social formation of personality,* London Sage Publications Ltd.

BURKITT, I. 1993. Overcoming metaphysics: Elias and Foucault on power and freedom. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences,* 23**,** 50-72.

BURKITT, I. 2002. Technologies of the self: Habitus and capacities. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour,* 32**,** 219-237.

BURKITT, I. 2004. The time and space of everyday life. *Cultural Studies,* 18**,** 211-227.

BURKITT, I. 2010. Fragments of Unconscious Experience: Towards a Dialogical, Relational, and Sociological Analysis. *Theory & Psychology,* 20**,** 322-341.

BURKITT, I. 2012. Emotional reflexivity: Feeling, emotion and imagination in reflexive dialogues. *Sociology,* 46**,** 458-472.

BURKITT, I. 2016. Relational agency: Relational sociology, agency and interaction. *European Journal of Social Theory,* 19**,** 322-339.

BUSENITZ, L. W. & BARNEY, J. B. 1997. Differences between entrepreneurs and managers in large organizations: Biases and heuristics in strategic decision-making. *Journal of business venturing,* 12**,** 9-30.

BYRNE, O. & SHEPHERD, D. A. 2015. Different strokes for different folks: Entrepreneurial narratives of emotion, cognition, and making sense of business failure. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice,* 39**,** 375-405.

CARLISLE, Y. & MCMILLAN, E. Innovation in organisations from a complex adaptive systems perspective. Complexity, Science and Society Conference Liverpool University 11-14 September 2005, 2005.

CFA. 2009. Business Link Broker, National Occupational Standards. Available: https://www.skillscfa.org/images/pdfs/National%20Occupational%20Standards/Management%20Consultancy%20and%20Business%20Support/2009/Business%20Link%20Broker.pdf.

CHAK, A. 2006. Dialogue on 'Reflecting on the self'. *Reflective Practice,* 7**,** 55-57.

CHECKLAND, P. 1985. From Optimizing to Learning: A Development of Systems Thinking for the 1990s. *The Journal of the Operational Research Society,* 36**,** 757-767.

CHECKLAND, P. & SCHOLES, J. 1990;2000. *Soft Systems Methodology in Action,* Chichester, West Sussex, John Wiley & Sons.

CHRISMAN, J. J. 1999. The influence of outsider-generated knowledge resources on venture creation. *Journal of Small Business Management,* 37**,** 42-58.

CHRISTENSEN, B. 2005. Emerging participative exploration: consultation as research. *A complexity perspective on researching organizations: Taking experience seriously***,** 78-106.

CHWOLKA, A. & RAITH, M. G. 2011. The value of business planning before start-up--A decision-theoretical perspective. *Journal of Business Venturing*.

CILLIERS, P. 1998. *Complexity and Postmodernism - understanding complex systems,* Routledge, London and New York.

CLANDININ, D. J., HUBER, J., HUBER, M., MURPHY, M. S., ORR, A. M., PEARCE, M. & STEEVES, P. 2006. *Composing diverse identities: Narrative inquiries into the interwoven lives of children and teachers,* Routledge.

CLARK, T. & FINCHAM, R. 2002. *Critical consulting: new perspectives on the management advice industry,* Malden, Mass, Blackwell Publishers.

CLEGG, S. R., KORNBERGER, M. & RHODES, C. 2004. Noise, parasites and translation theory and practice in management consulting. *Management Learning,* 35**,** 31-44.

COLLEY, H. 2012. Not learning in the workplace: austerity and the shattering of illusio in public service work. *Journal of Workplace Learning,* 24**,** 317-337.

COLLINS, D. 2004. Who put the con in consultancy? Fads, recipes and 'vodka margarine'. *Human Relations,* 57**,** 553-572.

COLLINSON, S. & JAY, M. 2012. *From Complexity to Simplicity: Unleash Your Organisation's Potential*, Palgrave Macmillan.

COPE, J. 2011. Entrepreneurial learning from failure: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Business Venturing,* 26**,** 604-623.

CORNELISSEN, J. P., OSWICK, C., CHRISTENSEN, L. T. & PHILLIPS, N. 2008. Metaphor in organizational research: Context, modalities and implications for research—Introduction. *Organization Studies,* 29**,** 7-22.

CRAIG, C. J. 2009. Learning about reflection through exploring narrative inquiry. *Reflective Practice,* 10**,** 105-116.

CUNLIFFE, A. L. 2003. Reflexive inquiry in organizational research: Questions and possibilities. *Human relations,* 56**,** 983-1003.

CUNLIFFE, A. L. 2011. Crafting qualitative research: Morgan and Smircich 30 years on. *Organizational Research Methods,* 14**,** 647-673.

CUNLIFFE, A. L., LUHMAN, J. T. & BOJE, D. M. 2004. Narrative temporality: Implications for organizational research. *Organization Studies,* 25**,** 261-286.

CURRAN, J. 2000. What is small business policy in the UK for? Evaluation and assessing small business policies. *International small business journal,* 18**,** 36-50.

CURRAN, J. & STOREY, D. J. 2002. Small business policy in the United Kingdom: the inheritance of the Small Business Service and implications for its future effectiveness. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* 20**,** 163-177.

CZARNIAWSKA, B. 1999. Management she wrote: organization studies and detective stories. *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies,* 5**,** 13-41.

CZARNIAWSKA, B. 2016. Reflexivity versus rigor. *Management Learning,* 47**,** 615-619.

CZARNIAWSKA, B. & MAZZA, C. 2003. Consulting as a liminal space. *Human relations,* 56**,** 267-290.

D'ABATE, C. P., EDDY, E. R. & TANNENBAUM, S. I. 2003. What's in a name? A literature-based approach to understanding mentoring, coaching, and other constructs that describe developmental interactions. *Human Resource Development Review,* 2**,** 360-384.

DA SILVA, F. C. 2007. *GH Mead: A critical introduction*, Polity.

DALAL, F. 2002. *Race, Colour and the Process of Racialization: New Perspectives from Group Analysis, Psychoanalysis and Sociology, ,* Brunner-Routledge.

DALAL, F. 2014. A Rumination on Intimacy and its Defences in the Consulting Room: A Response to Elizabeth Rohr's 38th Foulkes Lecture. *Group Analysis,* 47**,** 392-407.

DALLEY, J. & HAMILTON, B. 2000. Knowledge, Context and Learning in the Small Business. *international Small Business Journal,* 18**,** 51 - 61.

DE HAAN, E. 2005. A new vintage: old wine maturing in new bottles. *Training Journal***,** 20-24.

DE WIT, B. & MEYER, R. 2004. *Strategy : process, content, context: an international perspective,* London, Thomson.

DEAKINS, D. & FREEL, M. 1998. Entrepreneurial learning and the growth process in SMEs. *The Learning Organisation,* 5**,** 144-155.

DELMAR, F., DAVIDSSON, P. & GARTNER, W. B. 2003. Arriving at the high-growth firm. *Journal of business venturing,* 18**,** 189-216.

DELMAR, F. & SHANE, S. 2003. Does business planning facilitate the development of new ventures? *Strategic management journal,* 24**,** 1165-1185.

DEWEY, J. 1905. The realism of pragmatism. *The journal of philosophy, psychology and scientific methods,* 2**,** 324-327.

DEWEY, J. 1938. *Logic: the theory of inquiry,* New York Holt Rinehart & Winston.

DOOLEY, K. 1997. A complex Adaptive Systems Model of Organizational Change. *Nonlinear Dynamics, Pyschology, and Life Sciences,* 1**,** 1997.

DOOLEY, K. J. 2004. Complexity science models of organizational change and innovation. *Handbook of organizational change and innovation***,** 354-373.

DOYLE, S. 2013. Reflexivity and the capacity to think. *Qualitative Health Research,* 23**,** 248-255.

DTI. 2001. *Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) - Definitions* [Online]. DTI Available: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.dti.gov.uk/SME4/define.htm [Accessed 27/09/2017.

DUNNING, E. & HUGHES, J. 2012. *Norbert Elias and modern sociology: knowledge, interdependence, power, process,* A&C Black.

DYER, L. M. & ROSS, C. A. 2007. Advising the Small Business Client. *International Small Business Journal,* 25**,** 130-151.

DYER, L. M. & ROSS, C. A. 2008. Seeking advice in a dynamic and complex business environment: Impact on the success of small firms. *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship,* 13**,** 133-149.

EBBEN, J. J. & JOHNSON, A. C. 2005. Efficiency, flexibility, or both? Evidence linking strategy to performance in small firms. *Strategic management journal,* 26**,** 1249-1259.

ELIAS, N. 1956. Problems of Involvement and Detachment. *The British Journal of Sociology,* 7**,** 226-252.

ELIAS, N. 1971. Sociology of knowledge: New perspectives: Part one. *Sociology,* 5**,** 149-168.

ELIAS, N. 1978. NORBERT ELIAS AND "THE CIVILIZING PROCESS". *Theory and Society,* 5**,** 219-228.

ELIAS, N. 1998. *On civilization, power, and knowledge: Selected writings*, University of Chicago Press.

ELIAS, N. 2000. The Civilizing Process, rev. edn. *Malden, MA: Blackwell*.

ELIAS, N. 2001. *Society of individuals*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

ELIAS, N. & JEPHCOTT, E. 1982. *The civilizing process*, Blackwell Oxford.

ELIAS, N. & SCOTSON, J. L. 1994. *The established and the outsiders*, Sage.

ELKJAER, B. 2008. Pragmatism: A learning theory for the future. *In:* ILLERIS, K. (ed.) *Contemporary Theories of Learning.* Routledge Ltd - M.U.A.

ELKJAER, B. 2009. A learning theory for the future. *Contemporary theories of learning***,** 74.

ELLIS, C., BOCHNER, A., DENZIN, N., LINCOLN, Y., MORSE, J., PELIAS, R. & RICHARDSON, L. 2008. Talking and Thinking About Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 14**,** 254-284.

ERNST, B. & KIESER, A. 2002. CONSULTANTS AS AGENTS OF ANXIETY AND PROVIDERS OF MANAGERIAL CONTROL. *Academy of Management Proceedings & Membership Directory***,** C1-C6.

ETHERINGTON, K. 2004. *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher-Using Our Selves in Research*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

FINLAY, L. 2002a. Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative research,* 2**,** 209-230.

FINLAY, L. 2002b. "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative health research,* 12**,** 531-545.

FINLAY, L. 2008. Reflecting on reflective practice. *PBPL paper, Open University* 52**,** 1-27.

FLECK, L. 2012. *Genesis and development of a scientific fact*, University of Chicago Press.

FLINN, K. & MOWLES, C. 2014. A complexity approach to leadership development: developing practical judgement.

FLYVBJERG, B. 2004. Phronetic planning research: Theoretical and methodological reflections. *Planning Theory & Practice,* 5**,** 283-306.

FLYVBJERG, B. 2005. Social science that matters. *Foresight Europe,* 2**,** 38-42.

FORTE, E. 2011. *Intervention: The Battle for Better Business*, Lulu. com.

FOUCAULT, M. 1982. The subject and power. *Critical inquiry,* 8**,** 777-795.

FULLER, T. & MORAN, P. 2000. Moving beyond metaphor. *Emergence,* 2**,** 50-71.

FULLER, T. & MORAN, P. 2001. Small enterprises as complex adaptive systems: a methodological question? *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development,* 13**,** 47-63.

GABRIEL, Y. 2015. Reflexivity and beyond–a plea for imagination in qualitative research methodology. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal,* 10**,** 332-336.

GARTNER, W. B. 2007. Entrepreneurial narrative and a science of the imagination. *Journal of Business Venturing,* 22**,** 613-627.

GARTNER, W. B. 2010. A new path to the waterfall: A narrative on a use of entrepreneurial narrative. *International Small Business Journal,* 28**,** 6-19.

GHAYE, T. 2000. Editorial: Into the Reflective Mode: Bridging the Stagnant Moat. *Reflective Practice,* 1**,** 5.

GIDDENS, A. 1991. *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*, Stanford university press.

GINGRAS, Y. 2010. Review Essay: Sociological reflexivity in action: Pierre Bourdieu, Sketch for a Self-analysis (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), translated by Richard Nice, x+ 118 pp.,£ 12.99/18.58/20.00(pbk);£38.00/ 55.00/57.20 (hbk). ISBN 0-226-06751-3 (pbk); 0-226-06747-6 (hbk). *Social Studies of Science,* 40**,** 619-631.

GLÜCKLER, J. & ARMBRÜSTER, T. 2003. Bridging uncertainty in management consulting: The mechanisms of trust and networked reputation. *Organization Studies,* 24**,** 269-297.

GOFFMAN, E. 1983. The interaction order: American Sociological Association, 1982 presidential address. *American sociological review,* 48**,** 1-17.

GRANT, J. & CRAWLEY, J. 2002. *Transference and projection: Mirrors to the self*, McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

GRIFFIN, D., SHAW, P. & STACEY, R. 1998. Speaking of complexity in management theory and practice. *Organization,* 5**,** 315-339.

GRIFFIN, D. & STACEY, R. 2005. *Complexity and the Experience of Leading Organizations,* Abingdon and New York, Routledge.

HATCH, M. J. & YANOW, D. 2008. Methodology by metaphor: Ways of seeing in painting and research. *Organization Studies,* 29**,** 23-44.

HEGEL, G. W. F., MILLER, A. V. & FINDLAY, J. N. 1977. *Phenomenology of spirit,* Oxford, Clarendon Press.

HEINRICHS, S. & WALTER, S. 2013. Who becomes an entrepreneur? A 30-years-review of individual-level research and an agenda for future research. Arbeitspapiere des Instituts für Betriebswirtschaftslehre, Universität Kiel.

HENDRY, P. M. 2007. The future of narrative. *Qualitative inquiry,* 13**,** 487-498.

HICKS, J., NAIR, P. & WILDEROM, C. P. 2009. What if we shifted the basis of consulting from knowledge to knowing? *Management Learning,* 40**,** 289-310.

HICKS, J. N. 2010. *Co-constructive consulting: a pragmatic, relational constructionist approach*, University of Twente.

HIGGINS, D. 2011. The small firm: as a distributed evolving social learning network. *International Journal of Innovation and Learning,* 10**,** 268-284.

HIGGINS, D. 2017a. Developing a sense of appreciation for inquiry. *Action Learning: Research and Practice,* 14**,** 213-215.

HIGGINS, D. 2017b. Finding and developing voice: enabling action through scholarly practice. Taylor & Francis.

HIGGINS, D. & MIRZA, M. 2012. Considering Practice: a contemporary theoretical position towards social learning in the Small Firm. *Irish Journal of Management,* 31**,** 1.

HIGGINS, D., MIRZA, M. & DROZYNSKA, A. 2013a. Power, politics & learning: a social enactment of the SME owner/manager. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* 20**,** 470-483.

HIGGINS, D., SMITH, K. & MIRZA, M. 2013b. Entrepreneurial education: Reflexive approaches to entrepreneurial learning in practice. *The Journal of Entrepreneurship,* 22**,** 135-160.

HIGGINS, D., TREHAN, K. & MCGOWAN, P. 2015. Developing perspectives and challenging the" status quo". *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research,* 21.

HJALMARSSON, D. & JOHANSSON, A. W. 2003. Public advisory services - theory and practice. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development,* 15**,** 83-98.

HODGSON, G., HERMAN, S. & DOLLIMORE, D. 2017. Adaptability and survival in small-and medium-sized firms. *Industrial and Corporate Change*.

HONNETH, A. 1995. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts,* Cambridge, Polity Press.

HONNETH, A. & MARGALIT, A. 2001. Recognition. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* 75**,** 111-139.

HOOVER, E. A. & HOOVER, C. L. 2013. *Getting Along in Family Business,* Florence, UNKNOWN, Taylor and Francis.

HOSKING, D. M. 2011. Telling tales of relations: Appreciating relational constructionism. *Organization Studies,* 32**,** 47-65.

HOSKING, D. M. & PLUUT, B. 2010. (Re) constructing Reflexivity: A Relational Constructionist Approach. *The qualitative report,* 15**,** 59-75.

HOWORTH, C., TEMPEST, S. & COUPLAND, C. 2005. Rethinking entrepreneurship methodology and definitions of the entrepreneur. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* 12**,** 24-40.

HUGHES, A. 2009. Hunting the Snark: Some reflections on the UK experience of support for the small business sector. *Innovation,* 11**,** 114-126.

HUNTER, S. V. 2010. Analysing and representing narrative data: The long and winding road. *Current Narratives,* 1**,** 44-54.

HYTTI, U., ALSOS, G. A., HEINONEN, J. & LJUNGGREN, E. 2017. Navigating the family business: A gendered analysis of identity construction of daughters. *International Small Business Journal,* 35**,** 665-686.

JACKSON, M. C. 2000. *Systems Approaches to Management,* New York, Kluwer Academic.

JACKSON, M. C. 2003. *Systems thinking: Creative holism for managers*, Wiley Chichester.

JAKUBE, A., JASIENE, G., TAYLOR, M. E. & VANDENBUSSCHE, B. 2016. Holding the Space: Facilitating reflection and inner readiness for learning. Ghent: Sintjoris.

JAQUES, M. & POVEY, B. 2007. Assessing the changing role, attitudes and knowledge of UK business advisors to the benefits of benchmarking and benchmarking tools. *Benchmarking: An International Journal,* 14**,** 639-661.

JOHNSON, G., SCHOLES, K. & WHITTINGTON, R. 2008. *Exploring corporate strategy: text & cases,* Pearson Education.

JOHNSON, I. 2005. To understand a practice of consulting *In:* STACEY, R. & GRIFFIN, D. (eds.) *A Complexity Perspective on Researching Organisations: Taking experience seriously.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routlege.

JOHNSON, S., WEBBER, D. J. & THOMAS, W. 2007. Which SMEs use external business advice? A multivariate subregional study *Environment and Planning A,* 39**,** 1981-1997.

JOLLIFFE, L. 2006. Tea and hospitality: more than a cuppa. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management,* 18**,** 164-168.

JONES, O. 2006. Developing Absorptive Capacity in Mature Organizations The Change Agent's Role. *Management Learning,* 37**,** 355-376.

KAST, F. E. & ROSENZWEIG, J. E. 1972. General systems theory: Applications for organization and management. *Academy of management journal,* 15**,** 447-465.

KATZ, A. M. & SHOTTER, J. 1996. Hearing the patient's `voice': Toward a social poetics in diagnostic interviews. *Social Science & Medicine,* 43**,** 919-931.

KELEMEN, M. L. & RUMENS, N. 2008. *An introduction to critical management research,* Sage.

KETS DE VRIES, M. F. 2009. Action and reflection: the emotional dance between consultant and client.

KOCH, T. & HARRINGTON, A. 1998. Reconceptualizing rigour: the case for reflexivity. *Journal of advanced nursing,* 28**,** 882-890.

KOLB, D. A., RUBIN, I. M. & MCINTYRE, J. M. 1984. *Organizational psychology: readings on human behavior,* Englewood Cliffs, N.J, Prentice-Hall.

KUBR, M. 2002. *Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession,* Geneva, International Labour Office.

LAKOFF, G. & JOHNSON, M. 2008. *Metaphors we live by,* University of Chicago press.

LANGE, J., BYGRAVE, W. D., MOLLOV, A., PEARLMUTTER, M. & SINGH, S. 2005. Do business plans make no difference in the real world? A study of 117 new ventures.

LARSEN, H. 2005. Spontaneity and power: Theatre improvisation as processes of change in organizations.

LEAN, J., DOWN, S. & SADLER-SMITH, E. 1999. The nature of the client-personal business advisor relationship within Business Link *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* 6**,** 80-88.

LEE, N. 2014. What holds back high-growth firms? Evidence from UK SMEs. *Small Business Economics,* 43**,** 183-195.

LEVIN-ROZALIS, M. 2000. Abduction: a logical criterion for programme and project evaluation. *Evaluation,* 6**,** 415-432.

LINDBLOM, C. E. 2010. The science of "Muddling" through. *E:CO Emergence: Complexity and Organization,* 12**,** 70-80.

LINKLATER, A. & MENNELL, S. 2010. Norbert Elias, The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic investigations—an overview and assessment. *History and Theory,* 49**,** 384-411.

ŁOBACZ, K., GŁODEK, P., STAWASZ, E. & NIEDZIELSKI, P. 2016. Utilisation of business advice in small innovative firms – the role of trust and tacit knowledge. *Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review,* 4**,** 117-138.

LOEWEN WALKER, R. 2014. The living present as a materialist feminist temporality. *Women: A Cultural Review,* 25**,** 46-61.

LORENZ, E. 1972. *Predictability: does the flap of a butterfly's wing in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?,* na.

LUNDQUIST COEY, A. M. 2016. Exploring uncomfortable situations in the practice of a Swedish leadership consultant.

MACINTOSH, R., MACLEAN, D., STACEY, R. & GRIFFIN, D. 2013. *Complexity and organization: Readings and conversations,* Routledge.

MARION, R. 1999. *The Edge of Organization: Chaos and Complexity Theories of Formal Social Systems,* California, London, New Delhi, Sage Publications.

MARTELA, F. 2015. Fallible inquiry with ethical ends-in-view: A pragmatist philosophy of science for organizational research. *Organization Studies,* 36**,** 537-563.

MARTENS, M. L., JENNINGS, J. E. & JENNINGS, P. D. 2007. Do the stories they tell get them the money they need? The role of entrepreneurial narratives in resource acquisition. *Academy of Management Journal,* 50**,** 1107-1132.

MAUTHNER, N. S. & DOUCET, A. 2003. Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis. *Sociology,* 37**,** 413-431.

MAY, T. & PERRY, B. 2013. Reflexivity and data analysis. *Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis, London: Sage*.

MAY, T. & PERRY, B. 2014. Reflexivity and the practice of qualitative research. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis.* London: Sage.

MCDONALD, S., GAN, B. C., FRASER, S. S., OKE, A. & ANDERSON, A. R. 2015. A review of research methods in entrepreneurship 1985-2013. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research,* 21**,** 291-315.

MCKENNA, C. D. 2001. The World's Newest Profession: Management Consulting in the Twentieth Century. *Enterprise & Society,* 2**,** 673-679.

MEAD, G. H. 1912. The mechanism of social consciousness. *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods,* 9**,** 401-406.

MEAD, G. H. 1925. The genesis of the self and social control. *The International Journal of Ethics,* 35**,** 251-277.

MEAD, G. H. 1932. The philosophy of the present.

MEAD, G. H. 1934. *Mind, Self and Society,* University of Chicago Press.

MEAD, G. H. 1938. The philosophy of the act.

MENNELL, S. 1992. *Norbert Elias: an introduction,* University College Dublin Press.

MILLER, M. A. 2008. *Politics, ambiguity and executive discretion in government: processes of revealing and concealing.* DMan Thesis, Univeristy of Hertfordshire.

MILLER, S. 2004. What's going on? Parallel process and reflective practice in teaching. *Reflective Practice,* 5**,** 383-393.

MILLER, S. 2005. What it's like being the 'holder of the space': a narrative on working with reflective practice in groups. *Reflective Practice,* 6**,** 367-377.

MOLE, K. 2000. Gambling for growth or settling for survival: the dilemma of the small business adviser. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* 7**,** 305.

MOLE, K. 2002a. Business Advisers' Impact on SMEs. *International Small Business Journal,* 20**,** 139-162.

MOLE, K. 2002b. Street-level technocracy in UK small business support: Business Links, personal business advisers, and the Small Business Service *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* 20**,** 179-194.

MOLE, K. 2004. Systems theory and the commons-sense view of advisers. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* 11**,** 114-120.

MOLE, K. & MCLAUGHLIN, J. What happens in the first meeting between adviser and client. ISBE 29 th National Small Firms Policy and Research Conference, Cardiff, 2006.

MOLE, K. F. 2007. Tacit knowledge, heuristics, consistency and error signals. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* 14**,** 582-601.

MOLE, K. F. & BRAMLEY, G. 2006. Making policy choices in nonfinancial business support: an international comparison. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* 24**,** 885-908.

MOLE, K. F., HART, M. & ROPER, S. 2014. When moving information online diminishes change: advisory services to SMEs. *Policy Studies,* 35**,** 172-191.

MOLE, K. F. & KEOGH, W. 2009. The implications of public sector small business advisers becoming strategic sounding boards: England and Scotland compared. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development,* 21**,** 77 - 97.

MOWLES, C. 2009. Consultancy as temporary leadership: negotiating power in everyday practice. *International Journal of Learning and Change,* 3**,** 281-293.

MOWLES, C. 2011. *Rethinking Management: Radical Insights from the Complexity Sciences*, Gower Publishing Company.

MOWLES, C. 2012. Keeping means and ends in view—linking practical judgement, ethics and emergence. *Journal of International Development,* 24**,** 544-555.

MOWLES, C. 2015. *Managing in Uncertainty: Complexity and the Paradoxes of Everyday Organizational Life,* Routledge.

MOWLES, C. 2017a. Experiencing uncertainty: On the potential of groups and a group analytic approach for making management education more critical. *Management Learning***,** 1350507617697868.

MOWLES, C. 2017b. Group Analytic Methods Beyond the Clinical Setting—Working with Researcher–Managers. *Group Analysis***,** 0533316417701080.

MOWLES, C., STACEY, R. & GRIFFIN, D. 2008. What contribution can insights from the complexity sciences make to the theory and practice of development management? *Journal of International Development,* 20**,** 804-820.

MUGHAN, T., LLOYD-REASON, L. & ZIMMERMAN, C. 2004. Management consulting and international business support for SMEs: need and obstacles. *Education + Training,* 46**,** 424-432.

NAHAVANDI, A. & CHESTEEN, S. 1988. The impact of consulting on small business: A further examination. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice,* 13**,** 29-40.

NEWTON, T. 2003. Crossing the Great Divide: Time, Nature and the Social. *Sociology,* 37**,** 433-457.

NEWTON, T. 2010. Knowledge and Practice: Organization Studies within a Historical and Figurational Context. *Organization Studies,* 31**,** 1369-1395.

NIKOLOVA, N., MÖLLERING, G. & REIHLEN, M. 2015. Trusting as a 'Leap of Faith': Trust-building practices in client-consultant relationships. *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 31**,** 232-245.

NIKOLOVA, N., REIHLEN, M. & SCHLAPFNER, J.-F. 2009. Client–consultant interaction: Capturing social practices of professional service production. *Scandinavian journal of management,* 25**,** 289-298.

NOBLE, D. 1999. Improvisation and Emergence: jamming and managing'. *Complexity*.

NOBLE, D. 2004. Marketing and jazz. *Arts Marketing***,** 98.

NOLAN, M. 2005. 4 The emergence of global stability in local interaction in a consulting practice. *In:* STACEY, R. (ed.) *Experiencing Emergence in Organizations: Local Interaction and the Emergence of Global Patterns.* Routledge.

NONAKA, I. & TOYAMA, R. 2007. Strategic management as distributed practical wisdom (phronesis). *Industrial and Corporate Change,* 16**,** 371-394.

NORTH, D. J. & BALDOCK, R. 2009. Mystery shopping the early stages of the Business Link service.

OBOLENSKY, M. N. 2014. *Complex adaptive leadership: Embracing paradox and uncertainty*, Gower Publishing, Ltd.

ONS. *The relationship between gross value added (GVA) and gross domestic product (GDP)* [Online]. Available: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160128204104/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/economy/national-accounts/gva/relationship-gva-and-gdp/gross-value-added-and-gross-domestic-product.html [Accessed 02/09/2017.

ORR, J. E. Narratives at work: Story telling as cooperative diagnostic activity. Proceedings of the 1986 ACM conference on Computer-supported cooperative work, 1986. ACM, 62-72.

ORR, J. E. 1987. *Talking about machines: Social aspects of expertise*, Xerox Palo Alto Research Center Intelligent Systems Laboratory.

ORR, J. E. 2006. Ten years of talking about machines. *Organization Studies,* 27**,** 1805-1820.

ORR, K. & BENNETT, M. 2009. Reflexivity in the co-production of academic-practitioner research. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal,* 4**,** 85-102.

PAGE, E. 2013. There is sufficient evidence to suggest Whitehall is leaning on researchers to produce politically useful research. *The Impact Blog* [Online]. Available from: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/10/31/governments-lean-on-researchers/.

PALMER-WOODWARD, C. 2007. *Identity Formation and Emerging Intentions in Consultant-Client Relationships* Doctor of Management University of Hertfordshire

PASCALE, R. T. 1999. Surfing the edge of chaos. *Sloan management review,* 40**,** 83.

PELLANDINI-SIMÁNYI, L. 2014. Bourdieu, ethics and symbolic power. *The Sociological Review,* 62**,** 651-674.

PEMER, F. & WERR, A. 2013. The Uncertain Management Consulting Services Client. *International Studies of Management and Organization,* 43**,** 22-40.

PILLOW, W. 2003. Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,* 16**,** 175-196.

POE, E. A. & GREGG, G. 1960. *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, William R. Scott.

POLKINGHORNE, D. E. 1988. *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*, Suny Press.

POLLNER, M. 1991. Left of Ethnomethodology: The Rise and Decline of Radical Reflexivity. *American Sociological Review,* 56**,** 370-380.

POWELL, S. 2006. Spotlight on Richard T. Pascale. *Management Decision,* 44**,** 973-979.

PRIEST, S. J. 1999. Business Link services to small and medium-sized enterprises: targeting, innovation, and charging. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* **17,** 177 - 193.

PRIGOGINE, I. & STENGERS, I. 1984. *Order out of Chaos*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.

PUUTIO, R., KYKYRI, V. L. & WAHLSTRÖM, J. 2009. The process and content of advice giving in support of reflective practice in management consulting. *Reflective Practice,* 10**,** 513-528.

RAMSDEN, M. & BENNETT, R. J. 2005. The Benefits of External Support to SMEs: "Hard" versus "soft" outcomes and satisfaction levels. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* 12**,** 227-243.

RAPHALS, L. A. 1992. *Knowing words: Wisdom and cunning in the classical traditions of China and Greece*, Cornell University Press.

RAVITCH, S. M. & RIGGAN, M. 2016. *Reason & rigor: How conceptual frameworks guide research*, Sage Publications.

REID, I., ISMAIL, H., POOLTON, J., SHARIFI, H. & TEGOH, N. A. 2013. Going the extra mile:"An international critique into business intervention. *Institute for Small Business & Entrepreneurship*.

RICHARD, D. 2008. Small Business and Government - The Richard Report

RICHARDSON, L. 1997. *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*, Rutgers University Press.

RIDLEY, M. 2015. *The evolution of everything*, HarperCollins.

RIESSMAN, C. K. 2008. *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, Sage.

RIGBY, J. & RAMLOGAN, R. 2013. The impact and effectiveness of entrepreneurship policy. *Nesta Working Paper No. 13/01*. www.nesta.org.uk/wp13-01.

RITZER, G. & SMART, B. 2003. *Handbook of Social Theory*, London, Sage Publications Ltd.

ROBSON, P. J. A. & BENNETT, R. J. 2000. SME Growth: The Relationship with Business Advice and External Collaboration. *Small Business Economics,* 15**,** 193-208.

RUSSELL, J. E. & ADAMS, D. M. 1997. The changing nature of mentoring in organizations: An introduction to the special issue on mentoring in organizations. *Journal of Vocational Behavior,* 51**,** 1-14.

SADLER-SMITH, E., CHASTON, I. & SPICER, D. P. Organisational learning in smaller firms: An empirical perspective. Third International organisational learning conference, Lancaster, England, 1999.

SANDBERG, F. & KUBIAK, C. 2013. Recognition of prior learning, self-realisation and identity within Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. *Studies in Continuing Education,* 35**,** 351-365.

SAUNDERS, B., KITZINGER, J. & KITZINGER, C. 2015. Anonymising interview data: challenges and compromise in practice. *Qualitative Research,* 15**,** 616-632.

SCHATZKI, T. R., CETINA, K. K. & VON SAVIGNY, E. 2005. *The practice turn in contemporary theory*, Routledge.

SCHEIN, E. H. 2002. Consulting: What should it mean. *Critical Consulting, Blackwell Business, Oxford***,** 21-7.

SCHEIN, E. H. 2003. Five traps for consulting psychologists: or, How I learned to take culture seriously. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research,* 55**,** 75.

SCHNEIDER, M. & SOMERS, M. 2006. Organizations as complex adaptive systems: Implications of Complexity Theory for leadership research. *The Leadership Quarterly,* 17**,** 351-365.

SCOTT, J. C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts,* New Haven and London, Yale University Press

SCOTT, J. C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State,* New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

SCOTT, S. 2010. Simple Support, Better Business: business support in 2010| Policies| BIS.

SENNETT, R. 2001. Failure. *Understanding Business: Organisations,* 4**,** 203.

SHANNON, C. & WEAVER, W. 1949. A Mathematical Model of Communication Urbana. IL: University of Illinois Press.

SHAW, P. 2002. *Changing Conversations in Organizations: A complexity Approach to Change,* London and New York, Routledge.

SHAW, P. 2005. Conversational inquiry as an approach to organisation development. *Journal of Innovative Management, Fall***,** 19-22.

SHAW, P. 2011. Development of dialogue in organizations. Copenhagen Business School.

SHAW, P. 2015. Commentary on Dialogic Process Consultation. *Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change***,** 391.

SHOTTER, J. 1993. *Conversational realities: Constructing life through language*, Sage.

SHOTTER, J. 2008a. *Conversational Realities Revisited: Life, Language, Body and World* The Taos Institute Publications; 2 edition

SHOTTER, J. 2008b. Dialogism and polyphony in organizing theorizing in organization studies: Action guiding anticipations and the continuous creation of novelty. *Organization Studies,* 29**,** 501-524.

SHOTTER, J. Movements of Feeling and Moments of Judgement: Towards an Ontological Social Constructionism. Presentation at a plenary session at Constructing Worlds Conference 20-23 August 2009 2009 Berg, Denmark

SHOTTER, J. 2010. Inside our lives together: A Neo-Wittgensteinian constructionism. *The sociocultural turn in psychology: The contextual emergence of mind and self***,** 45-67.

SHOTTER, J. 2011. Embodiment, abduction, and expressive movement: A new realm of inquiry? *Theory & Psychology,* 21**,** 439-456.

SHOTTER, J. & CUNLIFFE, A. L. 2002. Managers as practical authors: everyday conversations for action. *In:* HOLMAN, D. & THORPE, R. (eds.) *Management and language:*.

SIEGEL, D. J. 1999. *The developing mind*, Guilford Press New York.

SIEGEL, D. J. 2001. Toward an interpersonal neurobiology of the developing mind: Attachment relationships, "mindsight," and neural integration. *Infant Mental Health Journal,* 22**,** 67-94.

SIEGEL, D. J. 2008. The Neurobiology of" we": How Relationships, the Mind, and the Brain Interact to Shape who We are. Sounds True.

SIEGEL, D. J. 2010. *Mindsight: The new science of personal transformation*, Bantam.

SIEGEL, D. J. 2012. *Developing Mind, Second Edition: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, New York, Guilford Publications.

SIEGEL, D. J. 2016. *Mind: A journey to the heart of being human*, WW Norton & Company.

SIMPSON, B. 2009. Pragmatism, Mead and the practice turn. *Organization Studies,* 30**,** 1329-1347.

SIMPSON, B. & CARROLL, B. 2008. Re-viewing role in processes of identity construction. *Organization,* 15**,** 29-50.

SIMPSON, B. & ELKJAER, B. 2011. Pragmatism: A lived and living philosophy. What can it offer to contemporary organization theory? *Philosophy and Organization Theory.*

SMALLBONE, D. & BALDOCK, R. Policy support for high growth start-ups: some lessons from the UK experience. CSB 2004 Conference 13th Nordic Conference on Small Business Research, 2004.

SMALLBONE, D. & HILL, K. Promoting Local Economic Development through Entrepreneurship. first Soweto International Conference on Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development, 2010. 27-28.

SOLOMON, A., BREUNLIN, D., PANATTONI, K., GUSTAFSON, M., RANSBURG, D., RYAN, C., HAMMERMAN, T. & TERRIEN, J. 2011. "Don't Lock Me Out": Life-Story Interviews of Family Business Owners Facing Succession. *Family Process,* 50**,** 149-166.

SPEER, S. A. & STOKOE, E. 2011. An introduction to conversation and gender. *Conversation and gender***,** 1-27.

SQUIRE, C. 2008. Approaches to narrative research. *ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper.* National Centre for Research Methods.

STACEY, R. 2000. The Emergence of Knowledge in Organization. *Emergence,* 2**,** 23.

STACEY, R. 2001a. *Complex Responsive Processes in Organisations: Learning and Knowledge Creation,* Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.

STACEY, R. 2001b. What Can it Mean to Say that the Individual is Social through and through? *Group Analysis,* 34**,** 457-471.

STACEY, R. 2003a. *Complexity and group processes: A radically social understanding of individuals*, Routledge.

STACEY, R. 2003b. Learning As An Activity Of Interdependent People *The Learning Organization,* 10.

STACEY, R. 2005a. *Experiencing emergence in organizations: Local interaction and the emergence of global patterns*, Routledge.

STACEY, R. 2005b. Organizational identity: The paradox of continuity and potential transformation at the same time. *Group Analysis,* 38**,** 477-494.

STACEY, R. 2005c. Social Selves and the Notion of the a" Group-as-a-Whole". *Group***,** 187-209.

STACEY, R. 2007a. The challenge of human interdependence. *European Business Review,* 19**,** 292.

STACEY, R. 2007b. *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics:The Challenge of Complexity,* London, Financial Times/Prentice Hall.

STACEY, R. 2010. *Complexity and Organisational Reality:Uncertainty and the need to rethink management after the collapse of investment capitalism,* London and New York, Routledge.

STACEY, R. 2011. *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics:The Challenge of Complexity,* London, Financial Times/Prentice Hall.

STACEY, R. 2012. *Tools and techniques of leadership and management: Meeting the challenge of complexity*, Routledge.

STACEY, R. & GRIFFIN, D. 2005. *A Complexity Perspective on Researching Organisations: taking experience seriously,* London, Routledge.

STACEY, R., GRIFFIN, D. & SHAW, P. 2000. *Complexity and Management - Fad or radical challenge to systems thinking?,* London, Routledge.

STACEY, R. & MOWLES, C. 2016. *Strategic management and organisational dynamics: the challenge of complexity to ways of thinking about organisations,* Harlow, Pearson Education.

STOREY, D. 2004. Exploring the link, among small firms, between management training and firm performance: a comparison between the UK and other OECD countries. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 15**,** 112-130.

STRONG, S. M. 1939. A Note on George H. Mead's The Philosophy of the Act. *American Journal of Sociology,* 45**,** 71-76.

SUHLER, C. L. & CHURCHLAND, P. S. 2009. Control: conscious and otherwise. *Trends in cognitive sciences,* 13**,** 341-347.

SUMMON, P. 1998. Business Link impact and future challenges. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* 5**,** 49-59.

THOMAS, G. 2010. Doing case study: Abduction not induction, phronesis not theory. *Qualitative inquiry,* 16**,** 575-582.

THORPE, R. & CLARKE, J. 2008. Performance in small firms. *Performance Management.* Springer.

TILLMAR, M. 2007. Gendered small-business assistance: lessons from a Swedish project. *Journal of European industrial training,* 31**,** 84-99.

VAN MAANEN, J., SØRENSEN, J. B. & MITCHELL, T. R. 2007. The interplay between theory and method. *Academy of management review,* 32**,** 1145-1154.

WALDROP, M. M. 1993. *Complexity: The emerging science at the edge of order and chaos,* Simon and Schuster.

WARWICK, R. & BOARD, D. 2012. Reflexivity as methodology: an approach to the necessarily political work of senior groups. *Educational Action Research,* 20**,** 147-159.

WARWICK, R. J. 2010. *The experience of policymaking in healthcare: the interaction of policy formulation and frontline staff practice.*

WEBB, C., LETTICE, F. & LEMON, M. 2005. Facilitating Learning & Sense-Making with Complexity Science Principles in Organisations by Means of a Complexity Starter Kit. *Science and Society Conference, 11th-14th September2005, Centre for Complexity Research,* . University of Liverpool, UK.

WEICK, K. E., SUTCLIFFE, K. M. & OBSTFELD, D. 2005. Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization science,* 16**,** 409-421.

WENZEL, E. 2012. *An Exploration of Processes of Mutual Recognition in Organization Development Initiatives from the Standpoint of a Practising Consultant.* Dissertation/Thesis.

WIGGINS, L. & HUNTER, H. 2016. *Relational Change: The Art and Practice of Changing Organizations,* Bloomsbury Publishing.

WIKLUND, J., PATZELT, H. & SHEPHERD, D. 2009. Building an integrative model of small business growth. *Small Business Economics,* 32**,** 351-374.

WILLIAMS, R. 2005. Belief, truth and justification: issues of methodology, discourse and the validity of personal narratives. *A complexity perspective on researching organizations***,** 43-73.

WILSON, B. 2001. Soft systems methodology: conceptual model building and its contribution.

WITZEL, M. 2015. *Management Consultancy,* Routledge Ltd.

WREN, C. & STOREY, D. J. 2002. Evaluating the effect of soft business support upon small firm performance. *Oxf. Econ. Pap.,* 54**,** 334-365.

ZHANG, M., MACPHERSON, A., TAYLOR, D. W. & JONES, O. 2004. Networks of learning: SME managerial approaches and responses.